

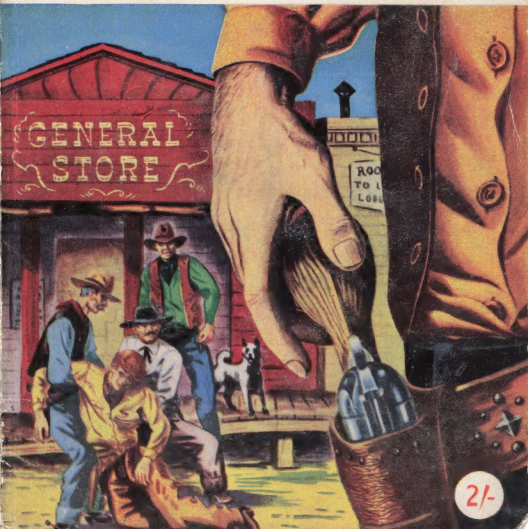


ZANE GREY'S *WESTERN*



MAGAZINE No. 20

MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT OF *THE RANGER* BY ZANE GREY



2/-



"Longstreth, you've shown your hand!" Duane shouted

The Ranger, Chap. 2



ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

No. 20

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This Month's Magazine Abridgment



THE heavily armed men who idle away their hours in the western Texas town of Ord call him "Dodge"—the somber, prematurely graying stranger who rides in on the huge black horse—for he readily admits he is "on the dodge." Later—for "Dodge" is not yet ready to show his hand—they are to recall him vividly.

To the newcomer, though he knows they are outlaws, these men at Ord are small fry; the big game he hunts is Cheseldine, the master bandit. For the stranger on the big black is none other than Buck Duane, former outlaw and still one of the most feared and talked-of gunmen of the border country. He is now sworn to the ranger service in a bargain by which he has dedicated himself and his gun to making good Captain MacNelly's boast that Cheseldine's gang will be destroyed.

Duane meets a Colonel Longstreth and his daughter, Ray, and does them a service less appreciated by the colonel than by his dark, attractive daughter. Later on in Fairfield, where the colonel proves to be an important man, Buck soon discovers that Texas Rangers—for circumstances force him to reveal that he is such—are unwelcome, especially to the town's officialdom. When his enemies begin to strike, he goes for aid to the handful of honest ranchers who still hold out against the power of Cheseldine.

Cheseldine, Knell, Poggin—these three names symbolize the obstacles Duane must overcome if he is to succeed in his mission. Cheseldine, the leader, the brain that directs the outlaws' depredations—elusive, shadowy, unidentified. Knell, Cheseldine's trusted lieutenant—strange-faced, cruel-voiced, cold and dangerous. Poggin, another of the leader's right-hand men—but more: Poggin, gunman supreme, whose terrible fame eats like a canker into Duane's mind, daring him, mocking him, subtly calling to his own wild past, challenging him to the inevitable showdown—the final, fundamental test of nerve and gun-speed.

"The Ranger" was published serially under the title, "The Lone Star Ranger," and later in book form as "Book Two" of The Lone Star Ranger.

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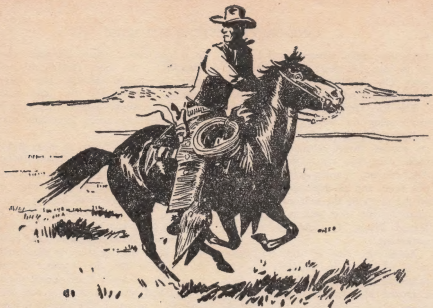
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The Ranger

By ZANE GREY

CHAPTER ONE

Outlaw's Domain

WEST of the Pecos River Texas extended a vast wild region, barren in the north where the Llano Estacado spread its shifting sands, fertile in the south along the Rio Grande. A railroad marked an undeviating course across five hundred miles of this country,

and the only villages and towns lay on or near this line of steel.

Unsettled as was this western Texas, and despite the acknowledged dominance of the outlaw bands, the pioneers pushed steadily into it. First had come the lone rancher; then his neighbors in near and far valleys; then the hamlets; at last the railroad and the towns. And still the pioneers came, spreading deeper into the valleys, farther and wider over the plains.

It was mesquite-dotted, cactus-covered desert, but rich soil upon which water

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acted like magic. There was little grass to an acre, but there were millions of acres. The climate was wonderful. Cattle flourished and ranchers prospered.

The Rio Grande flowed almost due south along the western boundary for a thousand miles, and then, weary of its course, turned abruptly north, to make what was called the Big Bend. The railroad, running west, cut across this bend, and all that country bounded on the north by the railroad and on the south by the river was as wild as the Staked Plains. It contained not one settlement.

Across the face of this Big Bend, as if to isolate it, stretched the Ord mountain range, of which Mount Ord, Cathedral Mount, and Elephant Mount raised bleak peaks above their fellows. In the valleys of the foothills and out across the plains were ranches, and farther north villages, and the towns of Alpine and Marfa.

Like other parts of the great Lone Star State, this section of Texas was a world in itself—a world where the riches of the rancher were ever enriching the outlaw. The village closest to the gateway of this outlaw-infested region was a little place called Ord, named after the dark peak that loomed some miles to the south. It had been settled originally by Mexicans—there were still the ruins of adobe missions—but with the advent of the rustler and outlaw many inhabitants were shot or driven away, so that the few Mexicans living there had their choice between holding hand-and-glove with the outlaws or furnishing target practice for that wild element.

Toward the close of a day in September a stranger rode into Ord, and

in a community where all men were remarkable for one reason or another he excited interest. His horse, perhaps, received the first and most engaging attention—horses in that region being apparently more important than men.

This particular horse at first glance seemed ugly. He was a giant, black as coal, rough despite the care manifestly bestowed upon him, long of body, ponderous of limb, huge in every way. A bystander remarked that if only his head had been seen he would have been a beautiful horse. Like men, horses show what they are in the shape, the size, the line, the character of the head. This one denoted fire, speed, blood, loyalty, and his eyes were as soft and dark as a woman's. His face was solid black, except in the middle of his forehead, where there was a round spot of white.

"Say, mister, mind tellin' me his name?" asked a ragged urchin, with born love of a horse in his eyes.

"Bullet," replied the rider.

"Thet there's fer the white mark, ain't it?" whispered the youngster to another. "Say, ain't he a whopper? Biggest hoss I ever seen."

Bullet carried a huge black silver-ornamented saddle of Mexican make, a lariat and canteen, and a small pack rolled into a tarpaulin.

This rider apparently put all care of appearances upon his horse. His apparel was the ordinary jeans of the cowboy without vanity, and it was torn and travel-stained. His boots showed evidence of an intimate acquaintance with cactus.

Like his horse, this man was a giant in stature, but rangier, not so heavily

built. Otherwise the only striking thing about him was his somber face with its piercing eyes, and hair white over the temples. He packed two guns, both low down—but that was too common a thing to attract notice in the Big Bend. A close observer, however, would have noted a singular fact—this rider's right hand was more bronzed, more weather-beaten than his left. He never wore a glove on that right hand!

He had dismounted before a rom-shackle structure that bore upon its wide, high-boarded front the sign HOTEL. There were horsemen coming and going down the wide street between its rows of old stores, saloons, and houses. Ord certainly did not look enterprising. Americans had manifestly assimilated much of the leisure of the Mexicans.

The hotel had a wide platform in front, and this did duty as porch and sidewalk. Upon it, and leaning against a hitching-rail, were men of varying ages, most of them slovenly in old jeans and slouched sombreros. Some were booted, belted, and spurred. The guns in that group would have outnumbered the men.

It was a crowd seemingly too lazy to be curious. These men were idlers; what else, perhaps, was easy to conjecture. Certainly to this stranger, who flashed a keen eye over them, they wore an atmosphere never associated with work.

Presently a tall man, with a drooping, sandy mustache, leisurely detached himself from the crowd. "Howdy, stranger," he said.

The stranger had bent over to loosen the cinches; he straightened up and nodded. Then: "I'm thirsty!"

That brought broad smiles to faces. One and all trooped after the stranger into the hotel. It was a dark, ill-smelling barn of a place, with a bar as high as a short man's head. A bartender with a scarred face was serving drinks.

"Line up, gents," said the stranger.

They piled over one another to get to the bar, with coarse jests and oaths and laughter. None of them noted that the stranger did not appear as thirsty as he had claimed to be. In fact, though he went through the motions, he did not drink at all.

"My name's Jim Fletcher," said the tall man with the drooping, sandy mustache. He spoke laconically; nevertheless there was a tone that showed he expected to be known. Something went with that name.

The stranger did not appear to be impressed. "My name might be Blazes, but it ain't," he replied. "What do you call this burg?"

"Stranger, this heah me-tropolis bears the handle Ord. Is thet new to you?" Fletcher leaned back against the bar, and now his little yellow eyes, clear as crystal, flawless as a hawk's, fixed on the stranger.

Other men crowded close, forming a circle, curious, ready to be friendly or otherwise, according to how the tall interrogator marked the newcomer.

"Sure, Ord's a little strange to me. Off the railroad some, aint it? Funny trails hereabouts."

"How fur was you goin'?"

"I reckon I was goin' as far as I could," replied the stranger with a hard laugh.

His reply had subtle reaction on that listening circle. Some of the men

exchanged glances. Fletcher stroked his drooping mustache.

"Wal, Ord's the jumpin'-off place," he said presently. "Sure you've heerd of the Big Bend country?"

"I sure have, an' was makin' tracks fer it," replied the stranger.

Fletcher turned toward a man in the outer edge of the group. "Knell, come in heah."

This individual elbowed his way in and was seen to be scarcely more than a boy, almost pale beside those bronzed men, with a long, expressionless face, thin and sharp.

"Knell, this heah's—" Fletcher wheeled to the stranger. "What'd you call yourself?"

"I'd hate to mention what I've been callin' myself lately."

This sally fetched another laugh. The stranger appeared cool, careless, indifferent. Perhaps he knew, as the others present knew, that this show of Fletcher's, this pretense of introduction, was merely talk while he was looked over.

Knell stepped up, and it was easy to see that a man greater than Fletcher had appeared upon the scene. "Any business here?" he queried curtly. When he spoke his expressionless face was in strange contrast with the ring, the quality, the cruelty of his voice. This voice betrayed an absence of humor, of friendliness, of heart.

"Nope," replied the stranger.

"Know anybody hereabouts?"

"Nary one."

"Jest ridin' through?"

"Yep."

"Slopin' fer back country, eh?"

There came a pause. The stranger appeared to grow a little resentful and

drew himself up disdainfully. "Wal, considerin' you-all seem so damn friendly an' oncurious down here in this Big Bend country, I don't mind sayin' yes—I am on the dodge," he replied with deliberate sarcasm.

"From west of Ord—out El Paso way, mebber?"

"Sure."

"A-huh! Thet so?" Knell's words cut the air, stilled the room. "You're from way down the river. Thet's what they say down there—'on the dodge.' Stranger, you're a liar!"

With swift clink of spur and thump of boot the crowd split, leaving Knell and the stranger in the center.

Knell stood ready. The stranger suddenly lost his every semblance to the rough and easy character before manifest in him. He became bronze. That situation seemed familiar to him. His eyes held a singular piercing light that danced like a compass needle.

"Sure I lied," he said, "so I ain't takin' offense at the way you called me. I'm lookin' to make friends, not enemies. You don't strike me as one of them four-flushes, achin' to kill somebody. But if you are—go ahead an' open the ball. You see, I never throw a gun on them fellers till they go fer theirs."

Knell coolly eyed his antagonist, his strange face not changing in the least. Yet somehow it was evident in his look that here was metal which rang differently from what he had expected. Invited to start a fight or withdraw, as he chose, Knell proved himself big in the manner characteristic of only the genuine gunman.

"Stranger, I pass," he said, and turning to the bar he ordered liquor.

The tension relaxed, the silence broke,

the men filled up the gap; the incident seemed closed. Jim Fletcher attached himself to the stranger, and now both respect and friendliness tempered his asperity.

"Wal, fer want of a better handle I'll call you Dodge," he said.

"Dodge's as good as any. Gents, line up again—an' if you can't be friendly, be careful!"

Such was Buck Duane's debut in the little outlaw hamlet of Ord.

Duane had been three months out of the Nueces country. At El Paso he bought the finest horse he could find, and, armed and otherwise outfitted to suit him, he had taken to unknown trails. Leisurely he rode from town to town, village to village, ranch to ranch, fitting his talk and his occupation to the impression he wanted to make upon different people whom he met. He was in turn a cowboy, a rancher, a cattleman, a stock-buyer, a boomer, a landhunter; and long before he reached the wild and inhospitable Ord he had acted the part of an outlaw, drifting into new territory.

He passed on leisurely because he wanted to learn the lay of the country, the location of villages and ranches, the work, habit, gossip, pleasures, and fears of the people with whom he came in contact. The one subject most impelling to him—outlaws—he never mentioned; but by talking all around it, sifting the old ranch and cattle story, he acquired a knowledge calculated to aid his plot.

When he heard Fletcher's name and faced Knell he knew he had reached the place he sought. Ord was a hamlet on the fringe of the grazing country, of doubtful honesty, from which, surely, winding trails led down into that free and

never-disturbed paradise of outlaws—the Big Bend.

Duane made himself agreeable, yet not too much so, to Fletcher and several other men disposed to talk and drink and eat; and then, after having a care for his horse, he rode out of town a couple of miles to a grove he had marked, and there, well hidden, he prepared to spend the night. This proceeding served a double purpose—he was safer, and the habit would look well in the eyes of outlaws, who would be more inclined to see in him the lone-wolf fugitive.

Long since Duane had fought out a battle with himself, won a hard-earned victory. His outer life, the action, was much the same as it had been; but the inner life had tremendously changed. He could never become a happy man, he could never shake utterly those haunting phantoms that had once been his despair and madness; but he had assumed a task impossible for any man save one like him, he had felt the meaning of it grow strangely and wonderfully, and through that flourished up consciousness of how passionately he now clung to this thing which would blot out his former infamy. He never forgot that he was free.

Strangely, too, along with this feeling of new manhood there gathered the force of imperious desire to run these chief outlaws to their dooms. He never called them outlaws—but rustlers, thieves, robbers, murderers, criminals. He sensed the growth of a relentless driving passion, and sometimes he feared that, more than the newly acquired zeal and pride in this ranger service, it was the old, terrible inherited killing-instinct lifting its hydra-head in new guise. But he could not be sure.

Another aspect of the change in Duane, neither passionate nor driving, yet not improbably even more potent of new significance to life, was the imperceptible return of an old love of nature dead during his outlaw days.

For years a horse had been only a machine of locomotion, to carry him from place to place, to beat, spur and goad mercilessly in flight; now this giant black, with his splendid head, was a companion, a friend, a brother, a loved thing, guarded jealously, fed and trained and ridden with an intense appreciation of his great speed and endurance.

For years the daytime, with its birth of sunrise on through long hours to the ruddy close, had been used for sleep or rest in some rocky hole or willow brake or deserted hut, had been hated because it augmented danger of pursuit, because it drove the fugitive to lonely, wretched hiding; now the dawn was a greeting, a promise of another day to ride, to plan, to remember, and sun, wind, cloud, rain, sky—all were joys to him, somehow speaking his freedom.

For years the night had been a black space, during which he had to ride unseen along the endless trails, to peer with cat-eyes through gloom for the moving shape that ever pursued him; now the twilight and the dusk and the shadows of grove and canyon darkened into night with its train of stars, and brought him calm reflection of the day's happenings, of the morrow's possibilities, perhaps a sad, brief procession of the old phantoms, then sleep.

For years canyons and valleys and mountains had been looked at as retreats that might be dark and wild

enough to hide even an outlaw; now he saw these features of the great desert with something of the eyes of the boy who had once burned for adventure and life among them.

This night a wonderful afterglow lingered long in the west, and against the golden-red of clear sky the bold, black head of Mount Ord reared itself aloft, beautiful but aloof, sinister yet calling. Somewhere deep in its corrugated sides or lost in a rugged canyon was hidden the secret stronghold of the master outlaw Cheseldine. All down along the ride from El Paso Duane had heard of Cheseldine, of his band, his fearful deeds, his cunning, his widely separated raids, of his flitting here and there like a Will o' the Wisp; but never a word of his den, never a word of his appearance.

Next morning Duane did not return to Ord. He struck off to the north, riding down a rough, slow-descending road that appeared to have been used occasionally for cattle driving. As he had ridden in from the west, this northern direction led him into totally unfamiliar country. While he passed on, however, he exercised such keen observation that in the future he would know whatever might be of service to him if he chanced that way again.

The rough, wild, brush-covered slope down from the foothills gradually leveled out into plain, a magnificent grazing-country, upon which till noon of that day Duane did not see a herd of cattle or a ranch. About that time he made out smoke from the railroad, and after a couple of hours' riding he entered a town which inquiry discovered to be Bradford.

It was the largest town he had visited

since Marfa, and he calculated must have a thousand or fifteen hundred inhabitants, not including Mexicans. He decided this would be a good place for him to hold up for a while, being the nearest town to Ord, only forty miles away. So he hitched his horse in front of a store and leisurely set about studying Bradford.

It was after dark, however, that Duane verified his suspicions concerning Bradford. There was one long row of saloons, dance halls, gambling-resorts in full blast. Duane visited them all, and saw wildness and license equal to that of the old river camp of Bland's in its palmiest days. Here it was forced upon him that the farther west one traveled along the river the sparser the respectable settlements, the more numerous the hard characters, the greater the element of lawlessness. Duane returned to his lodging-house with the conviction that the task of cleaning up the Big Bend country was a stupendous one.

The innkeeper had one other guest that night, a long black-coated and wide-sombreroed Texan who reminded Duane of his grandfather. This man had penetrating eyes, a courtly manner, and an unmistakable leaning toward companionship and mint juleps. The gentleman introduced himself as Colonel Webb, of Marfa, and took it as a matter of course that Duane made no comment about himself.

"Sir, it's all one to me," he said blandly, waving his hand. "I have traveled. Texas is free, and this frontier is one where it's healthier and just as friendly for a man to have no curiosity about his companion. You might be Cheseldine, of the Big Bend, or you

might be Judge Little, of El Paso—it's all one to me. I enjoy drinking with you anyway."

Duane, as always, was a good listener. Colonel Webb told, among other things, that he had come out to the Big Bend to look over the affairs of a deceased brother who had been a rancher and a sheriff of one of the towns, Fairdale by name.

"Found no affairs, no ranch, not even his grave," said Colonel Webb. "And I tell you, sir, if hell's any tougher than this Fairdale I don't want to expiate my sins there."

"Fairdale—I imagine sheriffs have a hard row to hoe out here," replied Duane, trying not to appear curious.

The Colonel swore lustily. "My brother was the only honest sheriff Fairdale ever had. It was wonderful how long he lasted. But he had nerve, he could throw a gun, and he was on the square. Then he was wise enough to confine his work to offenders of his own town and neighborhood. He let the riding outlaws alone, else he wouldn't have lasted at all—What this frontier needs, sir, is about six companies of Texas Rangers."

Duane was aware of the Colonel's close scrutiny. "Do you know anything about the service?" he asked.

"I used to. Ten years ago when I lived in San Antonio. A fine body of men, sir, and the salvation of Texas."

"Governor Stone doesn't entertain that opinion," said Duane.

Here Colonel Webb exploded. He talked politics for a while, and of the vast territory west of the Pecos that seemed never to get a benefit from Austin. He talked enough for Duane to realize that here was just the kind of

intelligent, well-informed, honest citizen that he had been trying to meet. He exerted himself thereafter to be agreeable and interesting; and he saw presently that here was an opportunity to make a valuable acquaintance, if not a friend.

"I'm a stranger in these parts," said Duane finally. "What is this outlaw situation you speak of?"

"It's damnable, sir, and unbelievable. Not rustling any more, but just wholesale herd stealing, in which some big cattlemen, supposed to be honest, are equally guilty with the outlaws. On this border, you know, the rustler has always been able to steal cattle in any numbers. But to get rid of big bunches—that's the hard job. The gang operating between here and Valentine evidently have not this trouble."

"Nobody knows where the stolen stock goes. But I'm not alone in my opinion that most of it goes to several big stockmen. They ship to San Antonio, Austin, New Orleans, also to El Paso. If you travel the stock road between here and Marfa and Valentine you'll see dead cattle all along the line and stray cattle out in the scrub. The herds have been driven fast and far, and stragglers are not rounded up."

"Wholesale business, eh?" remarked Duane. "Who are these—cr—big stock buyers?"

Colonel Webb bent his penetrating gaze upon Duane and thoughtfully stroked his pointed beard. "Names, of course, I'll not mention. Opinions are one thing, direct accusation another. This is not a healthy country for the informer."

When it came to the outlaws themselves Colonel Webb was disposed to talk freely. Duane could not judge

whether the Colonel had a hobby of that subject or the outlaws were so striking in personality and deed that any man would know all about them. The great name along the river was Cheseldine, but it seemed to be a name detached from an individual. No person of veracity known to Colonel Webb had ever seen Cheseldine, and those who claimed that doubtful honor varied so diversely in descriptions of the chief that they confused the reality and lent to the outlaw only further mystery.

Strange to say of an outlaw leader, as there was no one who could identify him, so there was no one who could prove he had actually killed a man. Blood flowed like water over the Big Bend country, and it was Cheseldine who spilled it. Yet the fact remained there were no eyewitnesses to connect any individual called Cheseldine with these deeds of violence. But in striking contrast to this mystery was the person, character, and cold-blooded action of Poggin and Knell, the chief's lieutenants. They were familiar figures in all the towns within two hundred miles of Bradford.

Knell had a record, but as gunman with an incredible list of victims Poggin was supreme. If Poggin had a friend no one ever heard of him. There were a hundred stories of his nerve, his wonderful speed with a gun, his passion for gambling, his love of a horse—his cold, implacable, inhuman wiping out of his path any man that crossed it.

"Cheseldine is a name, a terrible name," said Colonel Webb. "Sometimes I wonder if he's not only a name. In that case where does the brains of this gang come from? No; there must be a master craftsman behind this border

pillage; a master capable of handling those terrors Poggin and Knell. Of all the thousands of outlaws developed by western Texas in the last twenty years these three are the greatest. In southern Texas, down between the Pecos and the Nueces, there have been and are still many bad men. But I doubt if any outlaw there, possibly excepting Buck Duane, ever equalled Poggin. You've heard of this Duane?"

"Yes, a little," replied Duane quietly. "I'm from southern Texas. Buck Duane, then, is known out here?"

"Why, man, where isn't his name known?" returned Colonel Webb. "I've kept track of his record as I have all the others. Of course, Duane, being a lone outlaw, is somewhat of a mystery also, but not like Cheseldine. Out here there have drifted many stories of Duane, horrible some of them. But despite them a sort of romance clings to that Nueces outlaw. He's killed three great outlaw leaders, I believe—Bland, Hardin, and the other I forgot. Hardin was known in the Big Bend, had friends there. Bland had a hard name at Del Rio."

"Then this man Duane enjoys rather an unusual reputation west of the Pecos?" inquired Duane.

"He's considered more of an enemy to his kind than to honest men. I understand that Duane has many friends, that whole counties swear by him—secretly, of course, for he's a hunted outlaw with rewards on his head. His fame in this country appears to hang on his matchless gunplay and his enmity toward outlaw chiefs. I've heard many a rancher say: 'I wish to God that Buck Duane would drift out here! I'd give a hundred pesos to see him and Poggin meet.' It's a singular thing."

"Yes, indeed, it is singular," replied Duane. "Has Cheseldine's gang been busy lately?"

"No. This section has been free of rustling for months, though there's unexplained movements of stock. Probably all the stock that's being shipped now was rustled long ago. Cheseldine works over a wide section, too wide for news to travel inside of weeks. Then sometimes he's not heard of at all for a spell. These lulls are pretty surely indicative of a big storm sooner or later. And Cheseldine's deals, as they grow fewer and farther between, certainly get bigger, more daring."

"There are some people who think Cheseldine had nothing to do with the bank robberies and train holdups during the last few years in this country. But that's poor reasoning. The jobs have been too well done, too surely covered, to be the work of ordinary outlaws."

"What's your view of the outlook? How's all this going to wind up? Will the outlaw ever be driven out?" asked Duane.

"Never. There will always be outlaws along the Rio Grande. All the armies in the world couldn't comb the wild brakes of that fifteen hundred miles of river. But the sway of the outlaw, such as is enjoyed by these great leaders, will sooner or later be past. The outlaws kill themselves, and the ranchers are slowly rising in wrath, if not in action. That will come soon. If they only had a leader to start the fight! But that will come. There's talk of Vigilantes, the same that were organized in California and are now in force in Idaho. So far it's only talk. But the time will come. And the days of Cheseldine and Poggin are numbered."

Duane went to bed that night exceedingly thoughtful. The long trail was growing hot. It came to Duane in surprise that he was famous along the upper Rio Grande. Assuredly he would not long be able to conceal his identity. He had no doubt that he would soon meet the chiefs of this clever and bold rustling gang. He could not decide whether he would be safer unknown or known. In the latter case his one chance lay in the fatality connected with his name, in his power to look it and act it.

Duane had never dreamed of any sleuth-hound tendency in his nature, but now he felt something like one. Above all others his mind fixed on Poggin—Poggin the brute, the executor of Cheseldine's will, but mostly upon Poggin the gunman. This in itself was a warning to Duane. He felt terrible forces at work within him. There was the stern and indomitable resolve to make Ranger Captain MacNelly's boast good to the governor of the state—to break up Cheseldine's gang. Yet this was not in Duane's mind before a strange grim and deadly instinct—which he had to drive away for fear he would find in it a passion to kill Poggin, not for the state, nor for his word to MacNelly, but for himself. Had his father's blood and the hard years made Duane the kind of man who instinctively wanted to meet Poggin? He was sworn to the ranger service, and he fought himself to keep that, and that only, in his mind.

Duane ascertained that Fairdale was situated two days' ride from Bradford toward the north. There was a stage which made the journey twice a week.

Next morning Duane mounted his

horse and headed for Fairdale. He rode leisurely, as he wanted to learn all he could about the country. There were few ranches. The farther he traveled the better grazing he encountered, and, strange to note, the fewer herds of cattle.

It was just sunset when he made out a cluster of adobe houses that marked the halfway point between Bradford and Fairdale. Here, Duane had learned, was stationed a comfortable inn for wayfarers.

When he drew up before the inn the landlord and his family and a number of loungers greeted him laconically.

"Beat the stage in, hey?" remarked one.

"There she comes now," said another. "Joe shore is drivin' tonight."

Far down the road Duane saw a cloud of dust and horses and a lumbering coach. When he had looked after the needs of his horse he returned to the group before the inn. They awaited the stage with that interest common to isolated people. Presently it rolled up, a large, mud-bespattered, dusty vehicle, littered with baggage on top and tied on behind.

A number of passengers alighted, three of whom excited Duane's interest. One was a tall, dark, striking-looking man, and the other two were ladies, wearing long gray ulsters and veils. Duane heard the proprietor of the inn address the man as Colonel Longstreth, and as the party entered the inn Duane's quick ears caught a few words which acquainted him with the fact that Longstreth was the Mayor of Fairdale.

Duane passed inside himself to learn that supper would soon be ready. At

table he found himself opposite the three who had attracted his attention.

"Ruth, I envy the lucky cowboys," Longstreth was saying.

Ruth was a curly-headed girl with gray or hazel eyes. "I'm crazy to ride bronchos," she said.

Duane gathered she was on a visit to western Texas. The other girl's deep voice, sweet like a bell, made Duane regard her closer.

She had beauty as he had never seen it in another woman. She was slender, but the development of her figure gave Duane the impression she was twenty years old or more. She had the most exquisite hands Duane had ever seen. She did not resemble the Colonel, who was evidently her father. She looked tired, quiet, even melancholy. A finely chiseled oval face; clear, olive-tinted skin, long eyes set wide apart and black as coal, beautiful to look into; a slender, straight nose that had something nervous and delicate about it which made Duane think of a thoroughbred; and a mouth by no means small, but perfectly curved; and hair like jet—all these features proclaimed her beauty to Duane.

Duane believed her a descendant of one of the old French families of eastern Texas. He was sure of it when she looked at him, drawn by his rather persistent gaze. There were pride, fire, and passion in her eyes. Duane felt himself blushing in confusion. His stare at her had been rude, perhaps, but unconscious. How many years had passed since he had seen a girl like her! Thereafter he kept his eyes upon his plate.

After supper the guests assembled in a big sitting-room where an open fireplace with blazing mesquite sticks gave out warmth and cheery glow.

Duane took a seat by a table in the corner, and, finding a paper, began to read. Presently when he glanced up he saw two dark-faced men, strangers who had not appeared before, and were peering in from a doorway. When they saw Duane had observed them they stepped back out of sight.

It flashed over Duane that the strangers acted suspiciously. In Texas in the 'seventies it was always bad policy to let strangers go unheeded. Duane pondered a moment. Then he went out to look over these two men. The doorway opened into a patio, and across that was a little, dingy, dim-lighted bar-room. Here Duane found the innkeeper dispensing drinks to the two strangers.

They glanced up when he entered, and one of them whispered. He imagined he had seen one of them before. Duane's years on the border had augmented a natural instinct or gift to read character, or at least to sense the evil in men; and he knew that these strangers were dishonest.

"Hev somethin'?" one of them asked, leering.

"No thanks, I don't drink," Duane replied, and returned their scrutiny with interest. "How's tricks in the Big Bend?"

Both men stared. It had taken only a close glance for Duane to recognize a type of ruffian most frequently met along the river. These strangers had that stamp, and their surprise proved he was right. No more was said at the instant, and the two rather hurriedly went out.

"Say, boss, do you know those fellows?" Duane asked the innkeeper.

"Nope."

"Which way did they come?"

"Now I think of it, them fellers rid in from both corners today," he replied, and he put both hands on the bar and looked at Duane. "They nooned heah, comin' from Bradford, they said, an' trailed in after the stage."

When Duane returned to the sitting-room Colonel Longstreth was absent, also several of the other passengers. Miss Ruth sat in the chair he had vacated, and across the table from her sat Miss Longstreth. Duane went directly to them.

"Excuse me," said Duane, addressing them. "I want to tell you there are a couple of rough-looking men here. I've just seen them. They mean evil. Tell your father to be careful. Lock your doors—bar your windows tonight."

"Oh!" cried Ruth, very low. "Ray, do you hear?"

"Thank you; we'll be careful," said Miss Longstreth graciously. The rich color had faded in her cheek. "I saw those men watching you from that door. They had such bright black eyes. Is there really danger—here?"

"I think so," was Duane's reply.

Soft swift steps behind him preceded a harsh voice: "Hands up!"

No man quicker than Duane to recognize the intent in those words! His hands shot up. Miss Ruth uttered a little frightened cry and sank into her chair. Miss Longstreth turned white, her eyes dilated. Both girls were staring at someone behind Duane.

"Turn around!" ordered the harsh voice.

The big, dark stranger, the bearded one who had whispered to his comrade in the barroom and asked Duane to drink, had him covered with a cocked gun. He strode forward, his eyes gleaming,

pressed the gun against him, and with his other hand dove into his inside coat pocket and tore out his roll of bills. Then he reached low at Duane's hip, felt his gun, and took it. Then he slapped the other hip, evidently in search of another weapon. That done, he backed away.

His comrade stood in the door with a gun leveled at two other men, who stood there frightened, speechless.

"Git a move on, Bill," called this fellow, and he took a hasty glance backward. A stamp of hoofs came from outside. Of course the robbers had horses waiting. The one called Bill strode across the room, and with brutal, careless haste began to prod the two men with his weapon and to search them. The robber in the doorway called, "Rustle!" and disappeared.

Duane wondered where the inn-keeper was, and Colonel Longstreth and the other two passengers.

The bearded robber quickly got through with his searching, and from his growls Duane gathered he had not been well remunerated. Then he wheeled once more. Duane had not moved a muscle, stood perfectly calm with his arms high. The robber strode back with his blood-shot eyes fastened upon the girls. Miss Longstreth never flinched, but the other girl appeared about to faint.

"Don't yap, there!" he said, low and hard. He thrust the gun close to Ruth. Danger always made Duane exult in a kind of cold glow. But now something hot worked within him. He had a little gun in his pocket. The robber had missed it. And he began to calculate chances.

"Any money, jewelry, diamonds!" ordered the ruffian fiercely.

Miss Ruth collapsed. Then he made

at Miss Longstreth. She stood with her hands at her breast. Evidently the robber took this position to mean that she had valuables concealed there.

"Come out with it!" he said harshly, reaching for her.

"Don't dare touch me!" she cried, her eyes ablaze.

It made Duane thrill. He saw he was going to get a chance. Waiting had been a science with him. But here it was hard. Miss Ruth had fainted and that was well. Miss Longstreth had fight in her, which fact helped Duane, yet made injury possible to her. She eluded two lunges the man made at her. Then his rough hand caught her waist, and with one pull ripped it asunder, exposing her beautiful shoulder, white as snow.

She cried out. The prospect of being robbed or even killed had not shaken Miss Longstreth's nerve as had this brutal tearing off of half her waist.

The ruffian was only turned partially away from Duane. For himself he could have waited no longer. But for her! That gun was still held dangerously upward close to her. Duane watched only that. Then a bellow made him jerk his head.

Colonel Longstreth stood in the doorway in a magnificent rage. He had no weapon. He bellowed again.

Duane's shifting glance caught the robber's sudden movement. It was a kind of start. He seemed stricken. Duane expected him to shoot Longstreth. Instead the hand that clutched Miss Longstreth's torn waist loosened its hold. The other hand with its cocked weapon slowly dropped till it pointed to the floor. That was Duane's chance.

Swift as a flash he drew his gun and fired. *Thud!* went his bullet, and he

could not tell on the instant whether it hit the robber or went into the ceiling. Then the robber's gun boomed harmlessly. He fell with blood spurting over his face. Duane realized he had hit him, but the small bullet had glanced.

Miss Longstreth reeled and might have fallen had Duane not supported her. It was only a few steps to a couch, to which he half led, half carried her. Then he rushed out of the room, across the patio, through the bar to the yard. Nevertheless, he was cautious. In the gloom stood a saddled horse, probably the one belonging to the fellow he had shot. His comrade had escaped. Returning to the sitting-room, Duane found a condition approaching pandemonium.

The innkeeper rushed in, pitchfork in hands. Evidently he had been out at the barn. He was now shouting to find out what had happened. Joe, the stage driver, was trying to quiet the men who had been robbed. The woman, wife of one of the men, had come in, and she had hysterics. The girls were still and white. The robber Bill lay where he had fallen, so Duane had made a fair shot, after all. The thing that struck Duane most of all was Longstreth's rage. Like a caged lion Longstreth stalked and roared. There came a quieter moment in which the innkeeper shrilly protested:

"Man, what're you ravin' about? Nobody's hurt, an' that's lucky. I swear to God I hadn't nothin' to do with them fellers!"

"I ought to kill you anyhow!" replied Longstreth.

Upon examination Duane found that his bullet had furrowed the robber's temple, torn a great piece out of his scalp, and, as Duane had guessed, had

glanced. He was not seriously injured, and already showed signs of returning consciousness.

"Drag him out of here!" ordered Longstreth; and he turned to his daughter.

Before the innkeeper reached the robber Duane had secured the money and gun taken from him; and presently recovered the property of the other men. Joel helped the innkeeper carry the injured man somewhere outside.

Miss Longstreth was sitting white but composed upon the couch, where lay Miss Ruth, who evidently had been carried there by the Colonel. Duane did not think she had wholly lost consciousness, and now she lay very still, with eyes dark and shadowy, her face pallid and wet. The Colonel, now that he finally remembered his women-folk, seemed to be gentle and kind. He talked soothingly to Miss Ruth, made light of the adventure, said she must learn to have nerve out here where things happened.

"Can I be of any service?" asked Duane solicitously.

"Thanks; I guess there's nothing you can do. Talk to these frightened girls while I go see what's to be done with that thick-skulled robber," he replied, and, telling the girls that there was no more danger, he went out.

Miss Longstreth sat with one hand holding her torn waist in place; the other she extended to Duane. He took it awkwardly, and he felt a strange thrill.

"You saved my life," she said in grave, sweet seriousness.

"No, no!" Duane exclaimed. "He

might have struck you, hurt you, but no more."

"I saw murder in his eyes. He thought I had jewels under my dress. I couldn't bear his touch. The beast! I'd have fought. Surely my life was in peril."

"Did you kill him?" asked Miss Ruth, who lay listening.

"Oh no. He's not badly hurt."

"I'm very glad he's alive," said Miss Longstreth, shuddering.

"My intention was bad enough," Duane went on. "It was a ticklish place for me. You see, he was half drunk, and I was afraid his gun might go off. Fool-careless, he was!"

"Yet you say you didn't save me," Miss Longstreth returned quickly.

"Well, let it go at that," Duane responded. "I saved you something."

"Tell me all about it?" asked Miss Ruth, who was fast recovering.

Rather embarrassed, Duane briefly told the incident from his point of view.

"Then you stood there all the time with your hands up thinking of nothing—watching for nothing except a little moment when you might draw your gun?" asked Miss Ruth.

"I guess that's about it," he replied.

"Cousin," said Miss Longstreth thoughtfully, "it was fortunate for us that this gentleman happened to be here."

"Go with us all the way to Fairdale—please?" asked Miss Ruth, sweetly offering her hand. "I am Ruth Herbert. And this is my cousin, Ray Longstreth."

"I'm traveling that way," replied Duane in great confusion.

Colonel Longstreth returned then, and

after bidding Duane a good night, which seemed rather curt by contrast to the graciousness of the girls, he led them away.

Before going to bed Duane went outside to take a look at the injured robber and perhaps to ask him a few questions. To Duane's surprise, he was gone, and so was his horse. The innkeeper was dumbfounded. He said that he left the fellow on the floor in the bar-room.

"Had he come to?" inquired Duane.

"Sure. He asked for whisky."

"Did he say anything else?"

"No to me. I heard him talkin' to the father of them girls."

"You mean Colonel Longstreth?"

"I reckon. He sure was some riled, wasn't he? Jest as if I was to blame fer that two-bit of a holdup!"

"What did you make of the old gent's rage?" asked Duane, watching the innkeeper.

He scratched his head dubiously. He was sincere, and Duane believed in his honesty. "Wal, I'm doggoned if I know what to make of it. But I reckon he's either crazy or got more nerve than most Texans."

"More nerve, maybe," Duane replied. "Show me a bed now, innkeeper."

Once in bed in the dark, Duane composed himself to think over the several events of the evening. He called up the details of the holdup and carefully revolved them in mind. The Colonel's wrath, under circumstances where almost any Texan would have been cool, non-plussed Duane, and he put it down to a choleric temperament.

He pondered long on the action of the robber when Longstreth's bellow of rage burst in upon him. This ruffian,

as bold and mean a type as Duane had ever encountered, had, from some cause or other, been startled. Duane could come to only one conclusion—his start, his check, his fear had been that of recognition. Duane compared this effect with the suddenly acquired sense he had gotten of Colonel Longstreth's powerful personality.

Why had that desperate robber lowered his gun and stood paralyzed at sight and sound of the Mayor of Fairdale? There might have been a number of reasons, all to Colonel Longstreth's credit, but Duane could not understand. Longstreth had not appeared to see danger for his daughter, even though she had been roughly handled, and had advanced in front of a cocked gun. Duane brought to bear on the thing all his knowledge and experience of violent Texas life. And he found that the instant Colonel Longstreth had appeared on the scene there *was* no further danger threatening his daughter. Why? That likewise Duane could not answer. Then his rage, Duane concluded, had been solely at the idea of *his* daughter being assaulted by a robber.

Next morning Duane found that the little town was called Sanderson. It was larger than he had at first supposed. He walked up the main street and back again. Just as he arrived some horsemen rode up to the inn and dismounted. And at this juncture the Longstreth party came out.

Duane heard Colonel Longstreth utter an exclamation. Then he saw him shake hands with a tall man. Longstreth looked surprised and angry, and he spoke with force, but Duane could not hear what it was he said. The fellow laughed, yet somehow he struck Duane as sullen,

until suddenly he espied Miss Longstreth. Then his face changed, and he removed his sombrero. Duane went closer.

"Floyd, did you come with the teams?" asked Longstreth sharply.

"Not me. I rode a horse, good and hard," was the reply.

"Humph! I'll have a word to say to you later." Then Longstreth turned to his daughter. "Ray, here's the cousin I've told you about. You used to play with him ten years ago—Floyd Lawson. Floyd, my daughter—and my niece, Ruth Herbert."

Duane always scrutinized every one he met, and now with a dangerous game to play, with a consciousness of Longstreth's unusual and significant personality, he bent a keen and searching glance upon this Floyd Lawson.

He was under thirty, yet gray at his temples—dark, smooth-shaven, with lines left by wildness, dissipation, shadows under dark eyes, a mouth strong and bitter, and a square chin—a reckless, careless, handsome, sinister face strangely losing the hardness when he smiled. The grace of a gentleman clung round him, seemed like an echo in his mellow voice. Duane doubted not that he, like many a young man, had drifted out to the frontier, where rough and wild life had wrought sternly but had not quite effaced the mark of good family.

Colonel Longstreth apparently did not share the pleasure of his daughter and his niece in the advent of this cousin. Something hinged on this meeting. Duane grew intensely curious, but, as the stage appeared ready for the journey, he had no further opportunity to gratify it.

CHAPTER TWO

Duane Talks Turkey

D UANE followed the stage through the town, out into the open, on to a wide and hard-packed road showing years of travel. It headed northwest. To the left rose a range of low, bleak mountains he had noted yesterday, and to the right sloped the mesquite-patched sweep of ridge and flat. The driver pushed his team to a fast trot, which gait surely covered ground rapidly.

The stage made three stops in the forenoon, one at a place where the horses could be watered, the second at a chuck wagon belonging to cowboys who were riding after stock, and the third at a small cluster of adobe and stone houses constituting a hamlet the driver called Longstreth, named after the Colonel. From that point on to Fairdale there were only a few ranches, each one controlling great acreage.

Early in the afternoon from a ridge-top Duane sighted Fairdale, a green patch in the mass of gray. For the barrens of Texas it was indeed a fair sight. But he was more concerned with its remoteness from civilization than its beauty.

It needed only a glance for Duane to pick out Colonel Longstreth's ranch. The house was situated on the only elevation around Fairdale, and it was not high, nor more than a few minutes' walk from the edge of the town. It was a low, flat-roofed structure made of red adobe bricks, and covered what appeared to be fully an acre of ground. All was

green about it, except where the fenced corrals and numerous barns or sheds showed gray and red.

Duane soon reached the shady outskirts of Fairdale, and entered the town with mingled feelings of curiosity, eagerness, and expectation. The street he rode down was a main one, and on both sides of the street was a solid row of saloons, resorts, hotels. Saddled horses stood hitched all along the sidewalk in two long lines, with a buckboard and team here and there breaking the continuity. This block was busy and noisy.

From all outside appearances Fairdale was no different from other frontier towns, and Duane's expectations were scarcely realized. As the afternoon was waning he halted at a little inn. A boy took charge of his horse. Duane questioned the lad about Fairdale and gradually drew to the subject most in mind.

"Colonel Longstreth has a big outfit, eh?"

"Reckon he has," replied the lad. "Don't know how many cowboys. They're always comin' and goin'. I ain't acquainted with half of them."

"Much movement of stock these days?"

"Stock's always movin'," he replied with a queer look.

"Rustlers?"

But he did not follow up that look with the affirmative Duane expected.

"Lively place, I hear—Fairdale is?"

"Ain't so lively as Sanderson, but it's bigger."

"Yes, I heard it was. Fellow down there was talking about two cowboys who were arrested."

"Sure, I heard all about that. Joe Bean an' Brick Higgins—they belong

heah, but they ain't heah much. Longstreth's boys."

Duane did not want to appear over-inquisitive, so he turned the talk into other channels.

After getting his supper Duane strolled up and down the main street. When darkness set in he went into a hotel, bought cigars, sat around, and watched. Then he passed out and went into the next place. This was of rough crude exterior, but the inside was comparatively pretentious and ablaze with lights. It was full of men coming and going—a dusty-booted crowd that smelled of horses and smoke.

Duane sat down for a while, with wide eyes and open ears. Then he hunted up the bar, where most of the guests had been or were going. He found a great square room lighted by six huge lamps, a bar at one side, and all the floor space taken up by tables and chairs. This was the only gambling-place of any size in southern Texas in which he had noted the absence of Mexicans. There was some card playing going on at this moment. Duane stayed in there for a while, then returned to the inn where he had engaged a room.

Duane sat down on the steps of the dingy little restaurant. Two men were conversing inside, and they had not noticed Duane.

"Laramie, what's the stranger's name?" asked one.

"He didn't say," replied the other.

"Sure was a strappin' big man. Struck me a little odd, he did. No cattleman, him. How'd you size him?"

"Well, like one of them cool, easy, quiet Texans who's been lookin' for a man for years—to kill him when he found him."

"Right you are, Laramie; and, between you an' me, I hope he's looking for Long—"

"S-sh!" interrupted Laramie. "You must be half drunk, to go talkin' that way."

Thereafter they conversed in too low a tone for Duane to hear, and presently Laramie's visitor left. Duane went inside, and, making himself agreeable, began to ask casual questions about Fairdale. Laramie was not communicative.

Duane went to his room in a thoughtful frame of mind. Had Laramie's visitor meant he hoped some one had come to kill Longstreth? There was something wrong about the Mayor of Fairdale. Duane felt it. And he felt also, if there was a crooked and dangerous man, it was this Floyd Lawson.

And last in Duane's thoughts that night was Miss Longstreth. He could not help thinking of her—how strangely the meeting with her had affected him. It made him remember that long-past time when girls had been a part of his life. What a sad and dark and endless void lay between that past and the present! He had no right even to dream of a woman like Ray Longstreth. That conviction seemed perversely to make her grow more fascinating. Duane grew conscious of a strange, unaccountable hunger, a something that was like a pang in his breast.

Next day he lounged about the inn. He did not make any overtures to the taciturn proprietor. Duane had no need of hurry now. He contented himself with watching and listening. And at the close of that day he decided Fairdale was what Colonel Webb had claimed

it to be, and that he was on the track of an unusual adventure.

The following day he spent in much the same way, though on one occasion he told Laramie he was looking for a man. The innkeeper grew a little less furtive and reticent after that. He would answer casual queries, and it did not take Duane long to learn that Laramie had seen better days—that he was now broken, bitter, and hard. Someone had wronged him.

Several days passed. Duane did not succeed in getting any closer to Laramie, but he found the idlers on the corners and in front of the stores unsuspicious and willing to talk. It did not take him long to find out that Fairdale stood parallel with Huntsville for gambling, drinking, and fighting. The street was always lined with dusty, saddled horses, the town full of strangers. Money appeared more abundant than in any place Duane had ever visited; and it was spent with the abandon that spoke forcibly of easy and crooked acquirement.

Duane decided that Sanderson, Bradford, and Ord were but notorious outposts to this Fairdale, which was a secret center of rustlers and outlaws. And what struck Duane strangest of all was the fact that Longstreth was mayor here and held court daily. Duane knew intuitively, before a chance remark gave him proof, that this court was a sham, a farce. And he wondered if it were not a blind.

This wonder of his was equivalent to suspicion of Colonel Longstreth, and Duane reproached himself. Then he realized that the reproach was because of the daughter. Inquiry had brought him the fact that Ray Longstreth

had just come to live with her father. Longstreth had originally been a planter in Louisiana, where his family had remained after his advent in the West. He was a rich rancher, he owned half of Fairdale; he was a cattle buyer on a large scale. Floyd Lawson was his lieutenant and associate in deals.

On the afternoon of the fifth day of Duane's stay in Fairdale he returned to the inn from his usual stroll, and upon entering was amazed to have a rough-looking young fellow rush by him out of the door. Inside Laramie was lying on the floor, with a bloody bruise on his face. He did not appear to be dangerously hurt.

"Bo Snecker! He hit me and went after the cash drawer," said Laramie, laboring to his feet.

"Are you hurt much?" queried Duane.

"I guess not. But Bo needn't to have socked me. I've been robbed before without that."

"Well, I'll take a look after Bo," replied Duane.

He went out and glanced down the street toward the center of the town. He did not see anyone he could take for the innkeeper's assailant. Then he looked up the street, and he saw the young fellow about a block away, hurrying along and gazing back.

Duane yelled for him to stop and started to go after him. Snecker broke into a run. Then Duane set out to over-haul him. There were two motives in Duane's action—anger and a desire to make a friend of Laramie.

Duane was light on his feet, and he had a giant stride. He gained rapidly upon Snecker, who, turning this way and that, could not get out of sight.

Then he took to the open country and ran straight for the green hill where Longstreth's house stood.

Duane had almost caught Snecker when he reached the shrubbery and trees and there eluded him. But Duane kept him in sight, in the shade, on the paths, and up the road into the courtyard, and he saw Snecker go straight for Longstreth's house.

Duane did not stop to consider. It seemed enough to know that fate had directed him to the path of this rancher Longstreth. He entered the first open door on that side of the court. It opened into a corridor which led into a plaza. It had wide, smooth stone porches, and flowers and shrubbery in the center. Duane hurried through to burst into the presence of Miss Longstreth and a number of young people. Evidently she was giving a little party.

Lawson stood leaning against one of the pillars that supported the porch roof; at sight of Duane his face changed remarkably, expressing amazement, consternation, then fear.

In the quick ensuing silence Miss Longstreth rose, white as her dress. The young women present stared in astonishment. There were cowboys present who suddenly grew intent and still. Duane gathered that his appearance must be disconcerting. He was panting. He wore no hat or coat. His big gun-sheath showed plainly at his hip.

"Miss Longstreth—I came—to search—your house," panted Duane, in confusion.

He hardly knew what he was saying, yet the instant he spoke he realized that that should have been the last thing for him to say. He was not used to women, and this dark-eyed girl made

him thrill and his heart beat thickly and his wits go scattering.

"Search my house!" exclaimed Miss Longstreth, and red succeeded the white in her cheeks. She appeared astonished and angry. "What for? Why, how dare you! This is unwarrantable!"

"A man—Bo Snecker—assaulted and robbed Jim Laramie," replied Duane hurriedly. "I chased Snecker here—saw him run into the house."

"Here? Oh, sir, you must be mistaken. We have seen no one. In the absence of my father I'm mistress here. I'll not permit you to search."

Lawson stepped forward. "Ray, don't be bothered now," he said to his cousin. "This fellow's making a bluff. I'll settle him. See here, Mister, you clear out!"

"I want Snecker. He's here, and I'm going to get him," replied Duane quietly.

"Bah! That's all a bluff," sneered Lawson. "I'm on to your game. You just wanted an excuse to break in here—to see my cousin again. When you saw the company you invented that excuse. Now, be off, or it'll be the worse for you."

Duane felt his face burn with a tide of hot blood. Almost he felt that he was guilty of such motive. Had he not been unable to put this Ray Longstreth out of his mind? There seemed to be scorn in her eyes now. And somehow that checked his embarrassment.

"Miss Longstreth, will you let me search the house?" he asked.

"No."

"Then—I regret to say—I'll do so, without your permission."

"You'll not dare!" she flashed. She stood erect, her bosom swelling.

"Pardon me—yes, I will."

"Who are you?" she demanded suddenly.

"I'm a Texas Ranger," replied Duane.

"*A Texas Ranger!*" she echoed.

Floyd Lawson's dark face turned pale.

"Miss Longstreth, I don't need warrants to search houses," said Duane. "I'm sorry to annoy you I'd prefer to have your permission. A ruffian has taken refuge here—in your father's house. He's hidden somewhere. May I look for him?"

"If you are indeed a ranger."

Duane produced his papers. Miss Longstreth haughtily refused to look at them.

"Miss Longstreth, I've come to make Fairdale a safer, cleaner, better place for women and children. I don't wonder at your resentment. But to doubt me—insult me. Some day you may be sorry."

Floyd Lawson made a violent motion with his hands. "All stuff! Cousin, go on with your party. I'll take a couple of cowboys and go with this—this Texas Ranger."

"Thanks," said Duane coolly, as he eyed Lawson. "Perhaps you'll be able to find Snecker quicker than I could."

"What do you mean?" demanded Lawson, and now he grew livid.

"Don't quarrel," said Miss Longstreth. "Floyd, you go with him. Please hurry. I'll be nervous till—the man's found or you're sure there's not one."

They started with several cowboys to search the house. They went through the rooms searching, calling out, peering into dark places. It struck Duane forcibly that Lawson did all the calling. He was

hurried, too, tried to keep in the lead. It was Duane who peered into a dark corner and then, with a gun leveled, said, "Come out!"

He came forth into the flare—a tall, slim, dark-faced youth, wearing sombrero, blouse, and trousers. Duane colored him before any of the others could move and held the gun close enough to make him shrink. But he did not impress Duane as being frightened just then; nevertheless, he had a clammy face, the pallid look of a man who had just gotten over a shock. He peered into Duane's face, then into that of the cowboy next to him, then into Lawson's, and if ever in Duane's life he beheld relief it was then. That was all Duane needed to know, but he meant to find out more if he could.

"Who are you?" asked Duane quietly.

"Bo Snecker," he said.

"What'd you hide here for?"

He appeared to grow sullen. "Reckoned I'd be as safe in Longstreth's as anywhere."

"Ranger, what'll you do with him?" Lawson queried, as if uncertain, now the capture was made.

"I'll see to that," replied Duane, and he pushed Snecker in front of him out into the plaza.

Duane had suddenly conceived the idea of taking Snecker before Mayor Longstreth in the court.

When Duane arrived at the hall where court was held there were other men there, a dozen or more, and all seemed excited; evidently, news of Duane had preceded him.

Longstreth sat at a table up on a platform. Near him sat a thick-set grizzled man, with deep eyes, and this was Hanford Owens, county judge. To

the right stood a tall, angular, yellow-faced fellow with a drooping sandy mustache. Conspicuous on his vest was a huge silver shield. This was Gorsech, one of Longstreth's sheriffs. There were four other men whom Duane knew by sight, several whose faces were familiar, and half a dozen strangers, all dusty horsemen.

Longstreth pounded hard on the table to be heard. Mayor or not, he was unable at once to quell the excitement. Gradually, however, it subsided, and from the last few utterances before quiet was restored Duane gathered that he had intruded upon some kind of a meeting in the hall.

"What'd you break in here for?" demanded Longstreth.

"Isn't this the court? Aren't you the Mayor of Fairdale?" Duane's voice was clear and loud, almost piercing.

"Yes," replied Longstreth.

"I've arrested a criminal," said Duane.

"Arrested a criminal!" ejaculated Longstreth. "You? Who are you?"

"I'm a ranger," replied Duane.

A significant silence ensued.

"I charge Snecker with assault on Laramie and attempted robbery—if not murder. He's had a shady past here, as this court will know if it keeps a record."

"What's this I hear about you, Bo? Get up and speak for yourself," said Longstreth gruffly.

Snecker got up, not without a furtive glance at Duane, shuffled forward a few steps toward the mayor. "It ain't so, Longstreth," he began loudly. "I went in Laramie's place fer grub. Some feller I never seen before come in from the hall an' hit Laramie an' wrestled him on the floor. I went out. Then this

big ranger chased me an' fetched me here. I didn't do nothin'. This ranger's hankerin' to arrest somebody. That's my hunch, Longstreth."

Longstreth said something in an undertone to Judge Owens, and that worthy nodded his great bushy head.

"Bo, you're discharged," said Longstreth bluntly. "Now the rest of you clear out of here."

He absolutely ignored the ranger. That was his rebuff to Duane—his slap in the face to an interfering ranger service. If Longstreth was crooked he certainly had magnificent nerve. Duane almost decided he was above suspicion. But his nonchalance, his air of finality, his authoritative assurance—these to Duane's keen and practiced eyes were in significant contrast to a certain tenseness of line about his mouth and a slow paling of his olive skin.

Then Snecker, with a cough that broke the spell of silence, shuffled a couple of steps toward the door.

"Hold on!" called Duane. The call halted Snecker, as if it had been a bullet.

"Longstreth, I saw Snecker attack Laramie," said Duane, his voice still ringing. "What has the court to say to that?"

"The court has this to say—west of the Pecos we'll not aid any ranger service. We don't want you out here. Fairdale doesn't need you."

"That's a lie, Longstreth," retorted Duane. "I've letters from Fairdale citizens all begging for ranger service."

Longstreth turned white. The veins corded at his temples. He appeared about to burst into rage. He was at a loss for quick reply.

Floyd Lawson rushed in and up to

the table. The blood showed black and thick in his face; his utterance was incoherent, his uncontrollable outbreak of temper seemed out of all proportion to any cause he should reasonably have had for anger. Longstreth shoved him back with a curse and a warning glare.

"Where's your warrant to arrest Snecker?" shouted Longstreth.

"I don't need warrants to make arrests. Longstreth, you're ignorant of the power of Texas Rangers."

"You'll come none of your damned ranger stunts out here. I'll block you."

That passionate reply of Longstreth's was the signal Duane had been waiting for. He had helped on the crisis. He wanted to force Longstreth's hand and show the town his stand. Duane backed clear of everybody.

"Men! I call on you all!" cried Duane, piercingly. "I call on you to witness the arrest of a criminal prevented by Longstreth, Mayor of Fairdale. It will be recorded in the report to the Adjutant General at Austin. Longstreth, you'll never prevent another arrest."

Longstreth sat white with working jaw.

"Longstreth, you've shown your hand," said Duane in a voice that carried far and held those who heard. "Any honest citizen of Fairdale can now see what's plain—yours is a damn poor hand! You're going to hear me call a spade a spade. In the two years you've been Mayor you've never arrested one rustler. Strange, when Fairdale's a nest for rustlers! You've never sent a prisoner to Del Rio, let alone to Austin. You have no jail. There have been nine murders during your office—innumerable street fights and holdups. Not one arrest! But you have ordered arrests for trivial

offenses, and have punished these out of all proportion.

"There have been lawsuits in your court—suits over water rights, cattle deals, property lines. Strange how in these lawsuits you or Lawson or other men close to you were always involved! Strange how it seems the law was stretched to favor your interest!"

Duane paused in his cold, ringing speech. In the silence, both outside and inside the hall, could be heard the deep breathing of agitated men.

"Longstreth, here's plain talk for you and Fairdale," went on Duane. "I don't accuse you and your court of dishonesty. I say *strange!* Law here has been a farce. The motive behind all this laxity isn't plain to me—yet. But I call your hand."

CHAPTER THREE

Duane Seeks Allies

DUANE left the hall, elbowed his way through the crowd, and went down the street. He was certain that on the faces of some men he had seen ill-concealed wonder and satisfaction. He had struck some kind of a hot trail, and he meant to see where it led. It was by no means unlikely that Cheseldine might be at the other end.

Duane controlled a mounting eagerness. But ever and anon it was shot through with a remembrance of Ray

Longstreth. He might, very probably would, bring sorrow and shame to this young woman. The thought made him smart with pain. She began to haunt him, and then he was thinking more of her beauty and sweetness than of the disgrace he might bring upon her. Some strange emotion, long locked inside Duane's heart, knocked to be heard, to be let out. He was troubled.

Upon returning to the inn he found Laramie there, apparently none the worse for his injury.

"How are you, Laramie?" he asked.

"Reckon I'm feelin' as well as could be expected," replied Laramie. His head was circled by a bandage that did not conceal the lump where he had been struck. He looked pale, but was bright enough.

"That was a good crack Snecker gave you," remarked Duane.

"I ain't accusin' Bo," remonstrated Laramie, with eyes that made Duane thoughtful.

"Well, I accuse him. I caught him—took him to Longstreth's court. But they let him go."

Laramie appeared to be agitated by this intimation of friendship.

"See here, Laramie," went on Duane, "in some parts of Texas it's policy to be close-mouthed. Policy and health-preserving! Between ourselves, I want you to know I lean on your side of the fence."

Laramie gave a quick start. Presently Duane turned and frankly met his gaze. He had startled Laramie out of his habitual set taciturnity, but even as he looked the light that might have been amazement and joy faded out of his face, leaving it the same old mask. Still, Duane had seen enough.

"Talking about work, Laramie, who'd you say Snecker worked for?"

"I didn't say."

"Well, say so now, can't you? Laramie, you're powerful peevish today—it's that bump on your head. Who does Snecker work for?"

"When he works at all, which sure ain't often, he rides for Longstreth."

"Humph! Seems to me that Longstreth's the whole circus round Fairdale. I was some sore the other day to find I was losing good money at Longstreth's faro game. Sure if I'd won I wouldn't have been sore—ha, ha! But I was surprised to hear some one say Longstreth owned the Hope So joint."

"He owns considerable property hereabouts," replied Laramie constrainedly.

"Humph again! Laramie, like every other fellow I meet in this town, you're afraid to open your trap about Longstreth. Get me straight, Laramie. I don't care a damn for Colonel Mayor Longstreth. And for cause I'd throw a gun on him just as quick as on any rustler in Pecos."

"Talk's cheap," replied Laramie.

"Sure. I know that," Duane said. "And usually I don't talk. Then it's not well known that Longstreth owns the Hope So?"

"Reckon it's known in Pecos, all right. But Longstreth's name isn't connected with the Hope So. Blandy runs the place."

"That Blandy—his faro game's crooked, or I'm a locoed bronc. Not that we don't have lots of crooked faro dealers. A fellow can stand for them. But Blandy's mean, backhanded, never looks you in the eyes. That Hope So place ought to

be run by a good fellow like you, Laramie."

"Thanks," replied he, and Duane imagined his voice a little husky. "Didn't you hear I used to—run it?"

"No—did you?" Duane said quickly.

"I reckon. I built the place, made additions twice, owned it for eleven years."

"Well, I'll be doggoned." It was indeed Duane's turn to be surprised, and with the surprise came a glimmering. "I'm sorry you're not there now. Did you sell out?"

"No—just lost the place." Laramie was bursting for relief now—to talk, to tell. Sympathy had made him soft.

"It was two years ago—two years last March," he went on. "I was in a big cattle deal with Longstreth. We got the stock—an' my share, eighteen hundred head, was rustled off. I owed Longstreth. He pressed me. It come to a lawsuit—an' I—was ruined."

It hurt Duane to look at Laramie. He was white, and tears rolled down his cheeks. Duane saw the bitterness, the defeat, the agony of the man. He had failed to meet his obligations; nevertheless, he had been swindled. All that he suppressed, all that would have been passion had the man's spirit not been broken, lay bare for Duane to see. He had now the secret of his bitterness. But the reason he did not openly accuse Longstreth, the secret of his reticence and fear—these Duane thought best to try to learn at some later time.

"Hard luck! It certainly was tough," Duane said. "But you're a good loser. And the wheel turns! Now, Laramie, here's what—I need your advice. I've got a little money. But before I lose it I want to invest some. Buy some stock,

or buy an interest in some rancher's herd. What I want you to steer me on is a good square rancher. Or maybe a couple of ranchers, if there happen to be two honest ones. Ha, ha! No deals with ranchers who ride in the dark with rustlers! I've a hunch Fairdale is full of them. Now, Laramie, you've been here for years. Sure you must know a couple of men above suspicion."

"Thank God I do," he replied feelingly. "Frank Morton an' Si Zimmer, my friends an' neighbors all my prosperous days, an' friends still. You can gamble on Frank an' Si. But if you want advice from me—don't invest money in stock now."

"Why?"

"Because any new feller buyin' stock these days will be rustled quicker'n he can say Jack Robinson. The pioneers, the new cattlemen—these are easy pickin' for the rustlers. They don't know anythin' or anybody. An' the old ranchers are wise an' sore. They'd fight if they—"

"What?" Duane put in, as he paused. "If they knew who was rustling the stock?"

"Nope."

"If they had the nerve?"

"No thet so much."

"What then? What'd make them fight?"

"A leader!"

"Howdy thar, Jim," boomed a big voice. A man of great bulk, with a ruddy, merry face, entered the room.

"Hello, Morton," replied Laramie. "I'd introduce you to my guest here, but I don't know his name."

"Haw! Haw! Thet's all right. Few men out hyar go by their right names."

"Say, Morton," put in Duane, "Laramie gave me a hunch you'd be a good

man to tie to. Now, I've a little money and before I lose it I'd like to invest it in stock."

Morton smiled broadly.

"I'm on the square," Duane said bluntly. "If you fellows never size up your neighbors any better than you have sized me—well, you won't get any richer."

Morton showed his interest, but his faith held aloof.

"I've got some money. Will you let me in on some kind of deal? Will you start me up as a stockman with a little herd all my own?"

"Wal, stranger, to come out flat-footed, you'd be foolish to buy cattle now. I don't want to take your money an' see you lose out. Better go back across the Pecos where the rustlers ain't so strong. I haven't had more'n twenty-five hundred head of stock for ten years. The rustlers let me hang on to a breedin' herd. Kind of them, ain't it?"

"Sort of kind. All I hear is rustlers, Morton," replied Duane with impatience. "You see, I haven't ever lived long in a rustler-run country. Who heads the gang, anyway?"

Morton looked at Duane with a curiously amused smile, then snapped his big jaw as if to shut in impulsive words.

"Look here, Morton, it stands to reason, no matter how strong these rustlers are, how hidden their work, however involved with supposedly honest men—they *can't* last."

"They come with the pioneers, an' they'll last till thar's a single steer left," he declared.

"Well, if you take that view of

circumstances I just figure you as one of the rustlers!"

Morton looked as if he were about to brain Duane with the butt of his whip. His anger flashed by then, evidently as unworthy of him, and, something striking him as funny, he boomed out a laugh.

"It's not so funny," Duane went on. "If you're going to pretend a yellow streak, what else will I think?"

"Pretend?" he repeated.

"Sure. I know men of nerve. And here they're not any different from those in other places. I say if you show anything like a lack of sand it's all bluff. By nature you've got nerve. There are a lot of men around Fairdale afraid of their shadows—afraid to be out after dark—afraid to open their mouths. But you're not one. So I say if you claim these rustlers will last you're pretending lack of nerve just to help the popular idea along. For they *can't* last. What you need out here is some new blood. Savvy what I mean?"

"Wal, I reckon I do," he replied, looking as if a storm had blown over him. "Stranger, I'll look you up the next time I come to town." Then he went out.

Laramie had eyes like flint striking fire. He breathed a deep breath and looked around the room before his gaze fixed on Duane.

"Wal," he replied, speaking low. "You've picked the right men. Now, who in the hell are you?"

Reaching into the inside pocket of his buckskin vest, Duane turned the lining out. A star-shaped bright silver object flashed as he shoved it, pocket and all, under Jim's hard eyes.

"Ranger!" he whispered, cracking the

table with his fist. "You sure rung true to me."

"Laramie, do you know who's boss of this secret gang of rustlers hereabouts?" asked Duane bluntly. His voice—something deep, easy, cool about him—seemed to steady Laramie.

"No," replied Laramie.

"Does anybody know?" went on Duane.

"Wal, I reckon there's not one honest native who *knows*."

"But you have your suspicions?"

"We have."

"Give me your idea about this crowd that hangs round the saloons—the regulars."

"Jest a bad lot," replied Laramie with the quick assurance of knowledge. "Most of them have been here years. Others have drifted in. Some of them work, odd times. They rustle a few steers, steal, rob, anythin' for a little money to drink an' gamble. Jest a bad lot!"

"Have you any idea whether Cheseldine and his gang are associated with this gang here?"

"Lord knows. I've always suspected they're the same gang. None of us ever seen Cheseldine—an' that's strange, when Knell, Poggin, Panhandle Smith, Blossom Kane, and Fletcher, they all ride here often. No, Poggin doesn't come often, but the others do. For that matter, they're around all over west of the Pecos."

"Now I'm puzzled over this," said Duane. "Why do men—apparently honest men—seem to be so close-mouthed here? Is that a fact, or only my impression?"

"It's a sure fact," replied Laramie darkly. "Men have lost cattle an' pro-

perty in Fairdale—lost them honestly or otherwise, as hasn't been proved. An' in some cases when they talked—hinted a little—they was found dead. Apparently held up an' robbed—but dead. Dead men don't talk! That's why we're close-mouthed."

Duane felt a dark, somber sternness. Rustling cattle was not intolerable—but a cold, secret, murderous hold on a little struggling community was something too strange, too terrible for men to stand long.

The ranger was about to speak again when the clatter of hoofs interrupted him. Horses halted out in front, and one rider got down. Floyd Lawson entered. He called for tobacco.

If his visit surprised Laramie he did not show any evidence. But Lawson showed rage as he saw the ranger, and then a dark glint flitted from the eyes that shifted from Duane to Laramie and back again. Duane leaned easily against the counter.

"Say, that was a bad break of yours," Lawson said. "If you come fooling round the ranch again there'll be hell."

It seemed strange that a man who had lived west of the Pecos for ten years could not see in Duane something which forbade that kind of talk. It certainly was not nerve Lawson showed; men of courage were seldom intolerant. With the matchless nerve that characterized the great gunmen of the day there was a cool, unobtrusive manner, a speech brief, almost gentle, certainly courteous. Lawson was a man, evidently, who had never been crossed in anything, and who was strong, brutal, passionate, which qualities in the face of a situation like this made him simply a fool.

"I'm saying again, you used your

ranger bluff just to get near Ray Longstreth," Lawson sneered. "Mind you, if you come up there again there'll be hell."

"You're right. But not the kind you think," Duane retorted, his voice sharp and cold.

"Ray Longstreth wouldn't stoop to know a dirty blood-tracker like you," said Lawson hotly. "I'll call you right. You cheap bluffer! You fourflush! You damned interfering, conceited ranger!"

"Lawson, I'll not take offense, because you seem to be championing your beautiful cousin," replied Duane in slow speech. "But let me return your compliment. You're only a cheap fourflush—damned, bull-headed *rustler*!"

Duane hissed the last word. Then for him there was the truth in Lawson's working, passion-blackened face.

Lawson jerked, moved, meant to draw. But how slow! Duane lunged forward. His long arm swept up. And Lawson staggered backward, knocking over table and chairs, to fall hard, in a half-sitting posture against the wall.

"Don't draw!" warned Duane.

"Lawson, git away from your gun!" yelled Laramie.

But Lawson was crazed with fury. He tugged at his hip, his face corded with purple welts, malignant, murderous. Duane kicked the gun out of his hand. Lawson got up, raging, and rushed out.

Laramie lifted his shaking hands. "What'd you wing him for?" he wailed. "He was drawin' on you. Kickin' men like him won't do out here."

"That bull-headed fool will roar and butt himself with all his gang right into our hands. He's just the man I've needed

to meet. Besides, shooting him would have been murder."

"Murder!" exclaimed Laramie.

"Yes, for me," replied Duane.

"That may be true—whoever you are—but if Lawson's the man you think he is he'll begin that secret underground bizness. Why, Lawson won't sleep of nights now. He an' Longstreth have always been after me."

"Laramie, what are your eyes for?" demanded Duane. "Watch out. And now here—see your friend Morton. Tell him this game grows hot. Together you approach four or five men you know well and can absolutely trust. I may need your help."

Then Duane went from place to place, corner to corner, bar to bar, watching, listening, recording. The excitement had preceded him, and speculation was rife. He thought best to keep out of it.

After dark he stole up to Longstreth's ranch. The evening was warm; the doors were open; and in the twilight the only lamps that had been lit were in Longstreth's big sitting-room, at the far end of the house.

When a buckboard drove up and Longstreth and Lawson alighted, Duane was well hidden in the bushes, so well screened that he could get but a fleeting glimpse of Longstreth as he went in. For all Duane could see, he appeared to be a calm and quiet man, intense beneath the surface, with an air of dignity under insult. Duane's chance to observe Lawson was lost. They went into the house without speaking and closed the door.

At the other end of the porch, close under a window, was an offset between step and wall, and there in the shadow Duane hid. So Duane waited there in the

darkness with patience born of many hours of hiding.

Presently a lamp was lighted, and Duane heard the swish of skirts.

"Something's happened surely, Ruth," he heard Miss Longstreth say anxiously. "Papa just met me in the hall and didn't speak. He seemed pale, worried."

"Cousin Floyd looked like a thunder-cloud," said Ruth. "For once he didn't try to kiss me. Something's happened. Well, Ray, this has been a bad day."

"Oh, dear! Ruth, what can we do? These are wild men. Floyd makes life miserable for me. And he teases you unmer—"

"I don't call it teasing. Floyd wants to spoon," declared Ruth emphatically. "He'd run after any woman."

"A fine compliment to me, Cousin Ruth," laughed Ray.

"I don't care," replied Ruth stubbornly. "It's so. He's mushy. And when he's been drinking and tries to kiss me—I hate him!"

There were steps on the hall floor.

"Hello, girls!" sounded out Lawson's voice, minus its usual gaiety.

"Floyd, what's the matter?" asked Ray presently. "I never saw papa as he is tonight, nor you so—so worried. Tell me, what has happened?"

"Well, Ray, we had a jar today," replied Lawson, with a blunt, expressive laugh.

"Jar?" echoed both the girls curiously.

"We had to submit to a damnable outrage," added Lawson passionately. "Listen, girls; I'll tell you all about it." He coughed, cleared his throat in a way that betrayed he had been drinking.

Duane sank deeper into the shadow

of his covert and, stiffening his muscles for a protracted spell of rigidity, prepared to listen with all acuteness and intensity. Just one word from this Lawson, inadvertently uttered in a moment of passion, might be the word Duane needed for his clue.

"It happened at the town hall," began Lawson, rapidly. "Your father and Judge Owens and I were there in consultation with three ranchers from out of town. Then that damned ranger stalked in dragging Snecker, the fellow who hid here in the house. He had arrested Snecker for alleged assault on a restaurant keeper named Laramie. Snecker being obviously innocent, he was discharged.

"Then this ranger began shouting his insults. Law was a farce in Fairdale. The court was a farce. There was no law. Your father's office as mayor should be impeached. He made arrests only for petty offenses. He was afraid of the rustlers, highwaymen, murderers. He was afraid or—he just let them alone. He used his office to cheat ranchers and cattlemen in lawsuits. All this the ranger yelled for every one to hear. A damnable outrage! Your father, Ray, insulted in his own court by a rowdy ranger!"

"Oh!" replied Ray Longstreth in mingled distress and anger.

"The ranger service wants to rule western Texas," went on Lawson. "These rangers are all a low set, many of them worse than the outlaws they hunt. Some of them were outlaws and gunfighters before they became rangers. This is one of the worst of the lot. He's keen, intelligent, smooth, and that makes him more to be feared. For he is to be feared. He wanted to kill—he would kill. If your father had made the least move he would

have shot him. He's a cold-nerved devil—the born gunman. My God, any instant I expected to see your father fall dead at my feet!"

"Oh, Floyd! The unspeakable ruffian!" cried Ray Longstreth passionately.

"You see, Ray, this fellow, like all rangers, seeks notoriety. He made that play with Snecker just for a chance to rant against your father. He tried to inflame all Fairdale against him. That about the lawsuits was the worst! Damn him! He'll make us enemies."

"What do you care for the insinuations of such a man?" said Ray Longstreth, her voice now deep and rich with feeling. "After a moment's thought no one will be influenced by them. Do not worry, Floyd. Tell Papa not to worry. Surely after all these years he can't be injured in reputation by—an adventurer."

"Yes, he can be injured," replied Floyd quickly. "The frontier is a queer place. There are many bitter men here—men who have failed at ranching. And your father has been wonderfully successful. The ranger has dropped poison, and it'll spread."

CHAPTER FOUR

Friend in Need

STRANGERS rode into Fairdale; and other hard-looking customers, new to Duane if not to Fairdale, helped to create a charged and waiting atmosphere. The saloons did unusual business and were never closed. Respectable citizens of the

town were awakened in the early dawn by rowdies carousing in the streets.

Duane kept pretty close under cover during the day. He did not entertain the opinion that the first time he walked downstreet he would be a target for guns. Things seldom happened that way; and when they did happen so, it was more accident than design. But at night he was not idle. He met Laramie, Morton, Zimmer, and others of like character; a secret club had been formed, and all the members were ready for action.

Duane spent hours at night watching the house where Floyd Lawson stayed when he was not up at Longstreth's. At night he was visited, or at least the house was, by strange men who were swift, stealthy, mysterious—all that kindly disposed friends or neighbors would not have been. Duane had not been able to recognize any of these night visitors, and he did not think the time was ripe for a bold holding-up of one of them. Nevertheless, he was sure such an event would discover Lawson, or someone in that house, to be in touch with crooked men.

Laramie was right. Not twenty-four hours after his last talk with Duane, in which he advised quick action, he was found behind the little bar of his restaurant with a bullet hole in his breast, dead. No one could be found who had heard a shot. It had been deliberate murder, for upon the bar had been left a piece of paper rudely scrawled with a pencil: *All friends of rangers look for the same.*

This roused Duane. His first move, however, was to bury Laramie. None of Laramie's neighbors evinced any interest in the dead man or the unfortunate family he had left. Duane saw

that these neighbors were held in check by fear.

Mrs. Laramie was ill; the shock of her husband's death was hard on her; and she had been left almost destitute with five children. Duane rented a small adobe house on the outskirts of town and moved the family into it. Then he played the part of provider and nurse and friend.

After several days Duane went boldly into town and showed that he meant business. It was his opinion that there were men in Fairdale secretly glad of a ranger's presence. What he intended to do was food for great speculation.

A company of militia could not have had the effect upon the wild element of Fairdale that Duane's presence had. It got out that he was a gunman lightning-swift on the draw. It was death to face him. He had killed thirty men—wildest-rumor of all. It was actually said of him he had the gun-skill of Buck Duane or of Poggin.

At first there had been not only great conjecture among the vicious element, but also a very decided checking of all kinds of action calculated to be conspicuous to a keen-eyed ranger. At the tables, at the bars and lounging-places Duane heard the remarks: "Who's thet ranger after? What'll he do fust off? Is he waitin' fer somebody? Who's goin' to draw on him fust—an' go to hell? Jest about how soon will he be found somewheres full of lead?"

When it came out somewhere that Duane was openly cultivating the honest stay-at-home citizens to array them in time against the other element, then Fairdale showed its wolf teeth. Several times Duane was shot at in the dark and once slightly injured. Rumor had

it that Poggin, the gunman, was coming to meet him. But the lawless element did not rise up in a mass to slay Duane on sight.

It was not so much that the enemies of the law awaited his next move, but just a slowness peculiar to the frontier. The ranger was in their midst. He was interesting, if formidable. He would have been welcomed at card tables, at the bars, to play and drink with the men who knew they were under suspicion. There was a rude kind of good humor even in their open hostility.

Besides, one ranger or a company of rangers could not have held the undivided attention of these men from their games and drinks and quarrels except by some decided move. Excitement, greed, appetite were rife in them. Duane marked, however, a striking exception to the usual run of strangers he had been in the habit of seeing. Snecker had gone or was under cover.

Again Duane caught a vague rumor of the coming of Poggin, yet he never seemed to arrive. Moreover, the goings-on among the habitués of the resorts and the cowboys who came in to drink and gamble were unusually mild in comparison with former conduct. This lull, however, did not deceive Duane. It could not last. The wonder was that it had lasted so long.

Duane went often to see Mrs. Laramie and her children. One afternoon while he was there he saw Miss Longstreth and Ruth ride up to the door. They carried a basket. Duane felt strangely glad, but he went into an adjoining room rather than meet them.

"Mrs. Laramie, I've come to see you," said Miss Longstreth cheerfully.

The little room was not very light,

there being only one window and the doors, but Duane could see plainly enough. Mrs. Laramie lay, hollow-cheeked and haggard, on a bed. Once she had evidently been a woman of some comeliness.

"So you're Granger Longstreth's girl?" queried the woman, with her bright black eyes fixed on her visitor.

"Yes," replied Miss Longstreth simply. "This is my cousin, Ruth Herbert. We've come to nurse you, take care of the children, help you in any way you'll let us."

There was a long silence.

"Well, you look a little like Longstreth," finally said Mrs. Laramie, "but you're not *at all* like him. You must take after your mother. Miss Longstreth, I don't know if I can—if I ought accept anything from you. Your father ruined my husband."

"Yes, I know," replied the girl sadly. "That's all the more reason you should let me help you. Pray don't refuse. It will—mean so much to me."

If this poor, stricken woman had any resentment it speedily melted in the warmth and sweetness of Miss Longstreth's manner. Duane's idea was that the impression of Ray Longstreth's beauty was always swiftly succeeded by that of her generosity and nobility. At any rate she had started well with Mrs. Laramie, and no sooner had she begun to talk to the children than both they and the mother were won.

The opening of that big basket was an event. Poor, starved little beggars! Duane's feelings seemed too easily roused. However, Miss Longstreth and Ruth, after the nature of tender and practical girls, did not appear to take the sad situation to heart. The havoc was wrought

in that household. The needs now were cheerfulness, kindness, help, action—and these the girls furnished with a spirit that did Duane good.

"Mrs. Laramie, who dressed this baby?" presently asked Miss Longstreth.

Duane peeped in to see a dilapidated youngster on her knee. That sight, if any other was needed, completed his full and splendid estimate of Ray Longstreth and wrought strangely upon his heart.

"The ranger," replied Mrs. Laramie.

"The ranger!" exclaimed Miss Longstreth.

"Yes, he's taken care of us all since—since—" Mrs. Laramie choked.

"Oh! So you've had no help but his," replied Miss Longstreth hastily. "No women. Too bad! I'll send someone, Mrs. Laramie, and I'll come myself."

"It'll be good of you," went on the older woman. "You see, Jim had few friends—that is, right in town. And they've been afraid to help us—afraid they'd get what poor Jim—"

"That's awful!" burst out Miss Longstreth passionately. "A brave lot of friends! Mrs. Laramie, don't you worry any more. We'll take care of you. Here, Ruth, help me. Whatever is the matter with baby's dress?"

Manifestly Miss Longstreth had some difficulty in subduing her emotion.

"Why, it's on hind side before," declared Ruth. "I guess Mr. Ranger hasn't dressed many babies."

"He did the best he could," said Mrs. Laramie. "Lord only knows what would have become of us!"

"Then he is—is something more than a ranger?" queried Miss Longstreth.

"He's more than I can tell," replied Mrs. Laramie. "He buried Jim. He paid our debts. He fetched us here. He bought food for us. He cooked for us and fed us. He washed and dressed the baby. He sat with me the first two nights after Jim's death, when I thought I'd die myself. He's so kind, so gentle, so patient. He has kept me up just by being near."

"Sometimes I'd wake from a doze, an', seeing him there, I'd know how false were all these tales Jim heard about him and believed at first. Why, he plays with the children—just like any good man might. When he has the baby up I just can't believe he's a bloody gunman, as they say. He's good, but he isn't happy. He has such sad eyes."

"He looks far off sometimes when the children climb around him. They love him. His life is sad. Nobody need tell me—he sees the good in things. Once he said somebody had to be a ranger. Well, I say, 'Thank God for a ranger like him!'"

Duane did not want to hear more, so he walked into the room. "It was thoughtful of you," he said. "Woman-kind are needed here. I could do so little. Mrs. Laramie, you look better already. I'm glad. And here's baby, all clean and white. Baby, what a time I had trying to puzzle out the way your clothes went on. Well, Mrs. Laramie, didn't I tell you—friends would come? So will the brighter side."

"Yes, I've more faith than I had," replied Mrs. Laramie. "Granger Longstreth's daughter has come to me. There

for a while after Jim's death I thought I'd sink. We have nothing. How could I ever take care of my little ones? But I'm gaining courage to—"

"Mrs. Laramie, do not distress yourself any more," said Miss Longstreth. "I shall see you are well cared for. I promise you."

"Miss Longstreth, that's fine!" exclaimed Duane. "It's what I'd have—expected of you."

It must have been sweet praise to her, for the whiteness of her face burned out in a beautiful blush.

"And it's good of you, too, Miss Herbert, to come," added Duane. "Let me thank you both. I'm glad I have you girls as allies in part of my lonely task here—more than glad for the sake of this good woman and the little ones. But both of you be careful about coming here alone. There's risk. And now I'll be going. Good-by, Mrs. Laramie. I'll drop in again to-night. Good-by."

"Mr. Ranger, wait!" called Miss Longstreth, as he went out. She was white and wonderful. She stepped out of the door close to him.

"I have wronged you!" she said impulsively.

"Miss Longstreth! How can you say that?" he returned.

"I believed what my father and Floyd Lawson said about you. Now I see—I wronged you."

"You make me very glad. But, Miss Longstreth, please don't speak of wronging me. I have been a—*a* gunman, I *am* a ranger—and much said of me is true. My duty is hard on others—but God knows that duty is hard, too, on me."

"I did wrong you. If you entered my

home again I would think it an honor. I—"

"Please—please don't, Miss Longstreth," interrupted Duane.

"But my conscience flays me," she went on. There was no other sound like her voice, thought Duane. "Will you take my hand? Will you forgive me?"

She gave it royally, while the other was there pressing at her breast. Duane took the proffered hand. He did not know what else to do.

Then it seemed to dawn upon him that there was more behind this than just making amends for a fancied or real wrong. Duane thought the man did not live on earth who could have resisted her then.

"I honor you for your goodness to this unfortunate woman," she said swiftly. "When she was all alone and helpless you were her friend. It was the deed of a man. But Mrs. Laramie isn't the only unfortunate woman in the world. I, too, am unfortunate. Ah, how I may soon need a friend! Will *you* be my friend? I'm so alone. I'm terribly worried. Oh, surely I'll need a friend soon—soon. Oh, I'm afraid of what you'll find out sooner or later. Must I stand alone—all alone? Will you—will you be—" Her voice failed.

It seemed to Duane that she must have discovered what he had begun to suspect—that her father and Lawson were not the honest ranchers they pretended to be. Perhaps she knew more! Her appeal to Duane shook him deeply. He wanted to help her more than he had ever wanted anything. And with the meaning of the tumultuous sweetness she stirred in him there came realization of a dangerous situation.

"I must be true to my duty," he said hoarsely.

"If you knew me you'd know I could never ask you to be false to it."

"Well, then—I'll do anything for you."

"Oh, thank you! I'm ashamed that I believed my cousin Floyd! He lied—he lied. I'm all in the dark, strangely distressed. My father wants me to go back home. Floyd is trying to keep me here. They've quarreled. Oh, I know something dreadful will happen. I know I'll need you if—if— Will you help me?"

"Yes," replied Duane, and his look brought the blood to her face.

CHAPTER FIVE

Eavesdropping

AFTER supper Duane stole out for his usual evening's spying. The night was dark, without any starlight, and a stiff wind rustled the leaves. Duane bent his steps towards Longstreth's ranch house. He had so much to think about that he never knew where the time went.

This night when he reached the edge of the shrubbery he heard Lawson's well-known footsteps and saw Longstreth's door open, flashing a broad bar of light in the darkness. Lawson crossed the threshold, the door closed, and all

was dark again outside. Not a ray of light escaped from the window.

Little doubt there was that his talk with Longstreth would be interesting to Duane. He tiptoed to the door and listened, but could hear only a murmur of voices. Besides, that position was too risky. He went round the corner of the house.

This side of the big adobe house was of much older construction than the back and larger part. There was a narrow passage between the houses, leading from the outside through to the patio.

This passage now afforded Duane an opportunity, and he decided to avail himself of it in spite of the very great danger. Crawling on very stealthily, he got under the shrubbery to the entrance of the passage. In the blackness a faint streak of light showed the location of a crack in the wall. He had to slip in sideways. It was a tight squeeze, but he entered without the slightest noise. As he progressed the passage grew a very little wider in that direction, and that fact gave rise to the thought that in case of a necessary and hurried exit he would do best by working toward the patio.

It seemed a good deal of time was consumed in reaching a vantage-point. When he did get there the crack he had marked was a foot over his head. There was nothing to do but find toe holes in the crumbling walls, and by bracing knees on one side, back against the other, hold himself up. Once with his eye there he did not care what risk he ran.

Longstreth appeared disturbed; he sat stroking his mustache; his brow was clouded. Lawson's face seemed darker,

more sullen, yet lighted by some indomitable resolve.

"We'll settle both deals tonight," Lawson was saying. "That's what I came for."

"But suppose I don't choose to talk here?" protested Longstreth impatiently. "I never before made my house a place to—"

"We've waited long enough. This place's as good as any. You've lost your nerve since that ranger hit the town. First now, will you give Ray to me?"

"Floyd, you talk like a spoiled boy. Give Ray to you! Why, she's a woman, and I'm finding out that she's got a mind of her own. I told you I was willing for her to marry you. I tried to persuade her. But Ray hasn't any use for you now. She liked you at first, but now she doesn't. So what can I do?"

"You can make her marry me," replied Lawson.

"Make that girl do what she doesn't want to? It couldn't be done even if I tried. And I don't believe I'll try. I haven't the highest opinion of you as a prospective son-in-law, Floyd. But if Ray loved you I would consent. We'd all go away together before this damned miserable business is out. Then she'd never know. But as matters stand, you fight your own game with her. And I'll tell you now you'll lose."

"What'd you want to let her come out here for?" demanded Lawson hotly. "It was a dead mistake. I've lost my head over her. I'll have her or die. Don't you think if she was my wife I'd soon pull myself together! Since she came we've none of us been right. And the gang has put up a holler. No, Longstreth, we've got to settle things tonight."

"Well, we can settle what Ray's concerned in, right now," replied Longstreth, rising. "Come on; we'll ask her. See where you stand."

They went out, leaving the door open. Duane dropped down to rest himself and to wait. He would have liked to hear Miss Longstreth's answer. But he could guess what it would be.

The men seemed to be absent a good while, though that feeling might have been occasioned by Duane's thrilling interest and anxiety. Finally he heard heavy steps.

Lawson came in alone. He was leaden-faced, humiliated. Then something abject in him gave place to rage. He strode the room; he cursed.

Then Longstreth returned, now appreciably calmer. Duane could not but decide that he felt relief at the evident rejection of Lawson's proposal.

"Don't fuss about it, Floyd," he said. "You see I can't help it. We're pretty wild out here, but I can't rope my daughter and give her to you as I would an unruly steer."

"Longstreth, I can *make* her marry me," declared Lawson thickly.

"How?"

"You know the hold I got on you—the deal that made you boss of this rustler gang?"

"It isn't likely I'd forget," replied Longstreth grimly.

"I can go to Ray, tell her that, make her believe I'd tell it broadcast—tell this ranger—unless she'd marry me." Lawson spoke breathlessly, with haggard face and shadowed eyes. He had no shame. He was simply in the grip of passion.

Longstreth gazed with dark, controlled fury at this relative. In that

look Duane saw a strong, unscrupulous man fallen into evil ways, but still a man. It betrayed Lawson to be the wild and passionate weakling.

Duane seemed to see also how during all the years of association this strong man had upheld the weak one. But that time had gone forever, both in intent on Longstreth's part and in possibility. Lawson, like the great majority of evil and unrestrained men on the border, had reached a point where influence was futile.

"But, Floyd, Ray's the one person on earth who must never know I'm a rustler, a thief, a red-handed ruler of the worst gang on the border," replied Longstreth impressively.

Floyd bowed his head at that, as if the significance had just occurred to him. But he was not long at a loss. "She's going to find it out sooner or later. I tell you she knows now there's something wrong out here. She's got eyes. Mark what I say."

"Ray has changed, I know. But she hasn't any idea yet that her daddy's a boss rustler. Ray's concerned about what she calls my duty as mayor. Also I think she's not satisfied with my explanations in regard to certain property."

Lawson halted in his restless walk and leaned against the stone mantelpiece. He had his hands in his pockets. He squared himself as if this was his last stand. He looked desperate, but on the moment showed an absence of his usual nervous excitement.

"Longstreth, that may well be true," he said. "No doubt all you say is true. But it doesn't help me. I want the girl. If I don't get her—I reckon we'll all go

to hell!" He might have meant anything, probably meant the worst.

Longstreth gave a slight start, barely perceptible, like the switch of an awakening tiger. He sat there, head down, stroking his mustache. Almost Duane saw his thought. He had long experience in reading men under stress of such emotion. He had no means to vindicate his judgment, but his conviction was that Longstreth right then and there decided that the thing to do was to kill Lawson. For Duane's part he wondered that Longstreth had not come to such a conclusion before. Not improbably the advent of his daughter had put Longstreth in conflict with himself.

Suddenly he began to talk. He talked swiftly, persuasively, yet Duane imagined he was talking to smooth Lawson's passion for the moment. Lawson no more caught the fateful significance of a line crossed, a limit reached, a decree decided than if he had not been present. He was obsessed with himself.

How, Duane wondered, had a man of his mind ever lived so long and gone so far among the exacting conditions of the Southwest? The answer was perhaps, that Longstreth had guided him, upheld him, protected him. The coming of Ray Longstreth had been the entering-wedge of dissension.

"You're too impatient," concluded Longstreth. "You'll ruin any chance of happiness if you rush Ray. She might be won. If you told her who I am she'd hate you forever. She might marry you to save me, but she'd hate you. That isn't the way. Wait—play for time—be different with her. Cut out your drinking—she despises that. Let's plan to sell out here—stock, ranch, property—and

leave the country. Then you'd have a show with her."

"I told you we've got to stick," growled Lawson. "The gang won't stand for our going. It can't be done unless you want to sacrifice everything."

"You mean double-cross the men? Go without their knowing? Leave them here to face whatever comes?"

"I mean just that."

"I'm bad enough, but not that bad," returned Longstreth. "If I can't get the gang to let me off, I'll stay and face the music. All the same, Lawson, did it ever strike you that most of the deals the last few years have been *yours*?"

"Yes. If I hadn't rung them in there wouldn't have been any. You've had cold feet, and especially since this ranger has been here."

"Well, call it cold feet if you like. But I call it sense. We reached our limit long ago. We began by rustling a few cattle—at a time when rustling was laughed at. But as our greed grew so did our boldness. Then came the gang, the regular trips, the one thing and another till, before we knew it—before I knew it—we had shady deals, holdups, and *murders* on our record. Then we *had* to go on. Too late to turn back!"

"I reckon we've all said that. None of the gang wants to quit. They all think, and I think, we can't be touched. We may be blamed, but nothing can be proved. We're too strong."

"And there's where you're dead wrong," rejoined Longstreth emphatically. "I imagined that once, not long ago, I was bull-headed. Who would ever connect

Granger Longstreth with a rustler gang? I've changed my mind. We're crooked, and we can't last. It's the nature of life, even here, for conditions to grow better. The wise deal for us would be to divide equally and leave the country, all of us."

"But you and I have all the stock—all the gain," protested Lawson.

"I'll split mine."

"I won't—that settles that," added Lawson instantly.

Longstreth spread wide his hands as if it were useless to try to convince this man. Talking had not increased his calmness, and he now showed more than impatience. A dull glint gleamed deep in his eyes.

"Your stock and property will last a long time—do you lots of good when this ranger—"

"Bah!" hoarsely croaked Lawson. "Haven't I told you he'd be dead soon—any time—same as Laramie is?"

"Yes, you mentioned the—the supposition," replied Longstreth sarcastically. "I inquired, too, just how that event was to be brought about."

"The gang will lay him out."

"Floyd, don't be a fool. You've been on the border for ten years. You've packed a gun and you've used it. You've been with rustlers when they killed their men. You've been present at many fights. But you never in all that time saw a man like this ranger. The only way to get rid of him is for the gang to draw on him, all at once. Then he's going to drop some of them."

"Longstreth, you say that like a man who wouldn't care much if he did drop

some of them," declared Lawson, and now he was sarcastic.

"To tell you the truth, I wouldn't," returned the other bluntly. "I'm pretty sick of this mess."

Lawson cursed in amazement. "Longstreth, I don't like your talk," he said.

"If you don't like the way I talk you know what you can do," replied Longstreth quickly. He stood up then, cool and quiet, with flash of eyes and set of lips that told Duane he was dangerous.

"Well, after all, that's neither here nor there," went on Lawson, unconsciously cowed by the other. "The thing is, do I get the girl?"

"Not by any means except her consent."

"You'll not make her marry me?"

"No. No," replied Longstreth, his voice still cold, low-pitched.

"All right. Then I'll make her."

Evidently Longstreth understood the man before him so well that he wasted no more words. Duane knew what Lawson never dreamed of, and that was that Longstreth had a gun somewhere within reach and meant to use it.

Then heavy footsteps sounded outside tramping upon the porch. Duane believed those footsteps saved Lawson's life.

"There they are," said Lawson, and he opened the door.

Five masked men entered. They all wore coats hiding any weapons. A big man with burly shoulders shook hands with Longstreth, and the others stood back.

The atmosphere of that room had changed. Lawson might have been a

nonentity for all he counted. Longstreth was another man—a stranger to Duane. If he entertained a hope of freeing himself from this band, of getting away to a safer country, he abandoned it at the very sight of these men. There was power here, and he was bound.

The big man spoke in low, hoarse whispers, and at this all the others gathered around him close to the table. Then all the heads were bent over the table. Low voices spoke, queried, answered, argued. By straining his ears Duane caught a word here and there. They were planning and they were brief. Duane gathered they were to have a rendezvous at or near Ord.

Then the big man got up to depart. He went as swiftly as he had come, and was followed by his comrades.

Longstreth prepared for a quiet smoke. Lawson seemed uncommunicative and unsociable. He smoked fiercely and drank continually. All at once he straightened up as if listening.

"What's that?" he called, suddenly.

Duane's strained ears made out a slight rustling sound.

"Must be a rat," replied Longstreth.

The rustle became a rattle.

"Sounds like a rattlesnake to me," said Lawson.

Longstreth got up from the table and peered around the room.

Just at that instant Duane felt an almost inappreciable movement of the adobe wall which supported him. He could scarcely credit his senses. But the rattle inside Longstreth's room was mingling with little dull thuds of falling dirt. The adobe wall, merely dried mud,

was crumbling. Duane distinctly felt a tremor pass through it.

"What in the hell!" exclaimed Longstreth.

"I smell dust," said Lawson.

That was the signal for Duane to drop down from his perch, yet despite his care he made a noise.

"Did you hear a step?" queried Longstreth.

No one answered. But a heavy piece of the adobe wall fell with a thud. Duane heard it crack, felt it shake.

"There's somebody between the walls!" thundered Longstreth.

Then a section of the wall fell inward with a crash. Duane began to squeeze his body through the narrow passage toward the patio.

"Hear him!" yelled Lawson. "This side!"

"No, he's going that way," yelled Longstreth.

The tramp of heavy boots lent Duane the strength of desperation. He was not shirking a fight, but to be cornered like a trapped coyote was another matter. He almost tore his clothes off in that passage. The dust nearly stifled him. When he burst into the patio it was not a single instant too soon. But one deep gasp of breath revived him and he was up, gun in hand, running for the outlet into the court.

Thumping footsteps turned him back. While there was a chance to get away he did not want to fight. He thought he heard someone running into the patio from the other end. He stole along, and coming to a door, without any idea of where it might lead, he softly pushed it open a little way and slipped in.

CHAPTER SIX

"You Won't Kill Him?"

ALOW cry greeted Duane. The room was light. He saw Ray Longstreth sitting on her bed in her dressing-gown. With

a warning gesture to her to be silent, he turned to close the door. It was a heavy door without bolt or bar, and when Duane had shut it he felt safe only for a moment. Then he gazed around the room. There was one window with blind closely drawn. He listened and seemed to hear footsteps retreating, dying away.

Then Duane turned to Miss Longstreth. She had slipped off the bed, half to her knees, and was holding out trembling hands. She was as white as the pillow on her bed.

Again with warning hand commanding silence, Duane stepped softly forward, meaning to reassure her.

"Oh!" she whispered wildly, and Duane thought she was going to faint. When he got close and looked into her eyes he understood the strange, dark expression in them. She was terrified because she believed he meant to kill her, or do worse—probably worse. Duane realized he must have looked pretty hard and fierce bursting into her room with that big gun in hand.

"Listen—I didn't know this was your room. I came here to get away—to save my life. I was pursued. I was spying on—on your father and his men. They heard me, but did not see me. They

don't know who was listening. They're after me now."

Her eyes changed from blank gulfs to dilating, shadowing, quickening windows of thought. Then she stood up and faced Duane with fire and intelligence in her eyes. "Tell me now. You were spying on my father?"

Briefly Duane told her what had happened before he entered her room, not omitting a terse word as to the character of the men he had watched.

"My God! So it's that? I knew something was terribly wrong here—with him—with the place—the people. And right off I hated Floyd Lawson. Oh, it'll kill me if—if— It's so much worse than I dreamed. What shall I do?"

The sound of soft steps somewhere near distracted Duane's attention, reminded him of her peril, and now—what counted more with him—made clear the probability of being discovered in her room.

"I'll have to get out of here," whispered Duane.

"Wait," she replied. "Didn't you say they were hunting for you?"

"They sure are," he returned grimly.

"Oh, then you mustn't go. They might shoot you before you got away. Stay. If we hear them you can hide. I'll turn out the light. I'll meet them at the door. You can trust me. Wait till all quiets down, if we have to wait till morning. Then you can slip out."

"I oughtn't to stay. I don't want to—I won't," Duane replied, perplexed and stubborn.

"But you must—it's the only safe way. They won't come here."

"Suppose they should? It's an even chance Longstreth'll search every room and corner in this old house. If they

found me here I couldn't start a fight—you might be hurt. Then—the fact of my being here—"

Duane did not finish what he meant, but instead made a step toward the door. White of face and dark of eye, she took hold of him to detain him. The clasp of her hand was enough to make Duane weak.

"Up yet, Ray?" came Longstreth's clear voice, too strained, too eager to be natural.

"No—I'm in bed reading. Good night," instantly replied Miss Longstreth, so calmly and naturally that Duane marveled at the difference between man and woman. Then she motioned for Duane to hide in the closet. He slipped in, but the door would not close altogether.

"Are you alone?" went on Longstreth's penetrating voice.

"Yes," she replied. "Ruth went to bed."

The door swung inward with a swift scrape and jar. Longstreth half entered, haggard, flaming-eyed. Behind him Duane saw Lawson, and indistinctly another man.

Longstreth barred Lawson from entering, which action showed control as well as distrust. He wanted to see into the room. When he glanced around he went out and closed the door.

Then what seemed a long interval ensued. The house grew silent once more. Duane could not see Miss Longstreth, but he heard her quick and uneven breathing.

Hard and perilous as his life had been, this was a new kind of adventure. He had divined the strange softness of his feeling as something due to the magnetism of this beautiful

woman. It hardly seemed possible that he, who had been outside the pale for so many years, could have fallen in love.

Presently he pushed open the closet door and stepped forth. Miss Longstreth had her head lowered upon her arms and appeared to be in distress. At his touch she raised a quivering face.

"I think I can go now—safely," he whispered.

"Go then, if you must, but you may stay till you're safe," she replied.

"I—I couldn't thank you enough. It's been hard on me—this finding out—and you his daughter. But I want you to know—if I were not an outlaw—a ranger—I'd lay my life at your feet."

"Oh! You have seen so—so little of me," she faltered.

"All the same it's true. And that makes me feel more the trouble my coming has caused you."

"You will not fight my father?"

"Not if I can help it. I'm trying to get out of his way."

"But you spied upon him."

"I am a ranger, Miss Longstreth."

"And oh! I am a rustler's daughter," she cried. "That's so much more terrible than I'd suspected. It was tricky cattle deals I imagined he was engaged in. But only tonight I had strong suspicions aroused."

"How? Tell me."

"I overheard Floyd say that men were coming tonight to arrange a meeting for my father at a rendezvous near Ord. Father did not want to go. Floyd taunted him with a name."

"What name?" queried Duane.

"It was Cheseldine."

"Cheseldine! My God! Miss Longstreth, your father and Cheseldine are one and the same," whispered Duane hoarsely.

"I gathered so much myself," she replied miserably. "But Longstreth is father's real name."

Duane felt so stunned he could not speak at once. It was the girl's part in this tragedy that weakened him. The instant she betrayed the secret Duane realized perfectly that he did love her. The emotion was like a great flood.

"Miss Longstreth, all this seems so unbelievable," he whispered. "Cheseldine is the rustler chief I've come out here to get. He's only a name. Your father is the real man. I've sworn to get him. I'm bound by more than law or oaths. I can't break what binds me. And I must disgrace you—wreck your life! Why, Miss Longstreth, I believe I—I love you. It's all come in a rush. I'd die for you if I could. How fatal—terrible—this is! How things work out!"

She slipped to her knees, with her hands on his. "You won't kill him?" she implored. "If you care for me—you won't kill him?"

"No. That I promise you."

With a low moan she dropped her head upon the bed.

Duane opened the door and stealthily stole out through the corridor to the court.

When Duane got out into the dark, where his hot face cooled in the wind, his relief equaled his other feelings.

The night was dark, windy, stormy, yet there was no rain. Duane hoped as soon as he got clear of the ranch to lose something of the pain he felt. But

long after he had tramped out into the open there was a lump in his throat and an ache in his breast.

All his thought centered around Ray Longstreth. What a woman she had turned out to be! He had a vague, hopeless hope that there might be, there must be, some way he could save her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Stroke of Luck

BEFORE going to sleep that night Duane had decided to go to Ord and then try to find the rendezvous where Longstreth was to meet his men. These men Duane wanted even more than their leader. If Longstreth, or Cheseldine, was the brains of that gang, Poggin was the executor. It was Poggin who needed to be found and stopped. Poggin and his right-hand men!

Duane experienced a strange tigerish thrill. It was thought of Poggin more than thought of success for the plan he had undertaken. Duane felt dubious over this emotion.

Next day he set out for Bradford. He was glad to get away from Fairdale for a while. But the hours and the miles in no wise changed the new pain in his heart. The only way he could forget Miss Longstreth was to let his mind dwell upon Poggin, and even this was not always effective.

He avoided Sanderson, and at the

end of a day and a half he arrived at Bradford.

The night of the day before he reached Bradford, No. 6, the mail and express train going east, was held up by train robbers, the Wells-Fargo messenger killed over his safe, the mail clerk wounded, the bags carried away. The engine of No. 6 came into town minus even a tender, and engineer and fireman told conflicting stories. A posse of railroad men and citizens, led by a sheriff Duane suspected was crooked, was made up before the engine steamed back to pick up the rest of the train.

Duane had the sudden inspiration that he had been cudgeling his mind to find; and, acting upon it, he mounted his horse again and left Bradford unobserved. As he rode out into the night, over a dark trail in the direction of Ord, he uttered a short, grim, sardonic laugh at the hope that he might be taken for a train robber.

He rode at an easy trot most of the night, and when the black peak of Ord Mountain loomed up against the stars he halted, tied his horse, and slept until dawn. He had brought a small pack, and now he took his time cooking breakfast. When the sun was well up he saddled Bullet, and, leaving the trail where his tracks showed plain in the ground, he put his horse to the rocks and brush.

He selected an exceedingly rough, roundabout and difficult course to Ord, hid his tracks with the skill of a long-hunted fugitive, and arrived there with his horse winded and covered with lather. It added considerable to his arrival that the man Duane remembered as Fletcher and several others saw him come in the back way through the lots and jump a fence into the road.

Duane led Bullet up to the porch where Fletcher stood wiping his beard. He was hatless, vestless, and evidently had just enjoyed a morning drink.

"Howdy, Dodge," said Fletcher laconically.

Duane replied, and the other men returned the greeting with interest.

"Jim, my hoss's done up. I want to hide him from any chance tourists as might happen to ride up curious-like."

"Haw! haw! haw!"

Duane gathered encouragement from that chorus of coarse laughter.

"Wal, if them tourists ain't too durned snooky the hoss'll be safe in the 'dobe shack back of Bill's here. Feed thar, too, but you'll hev to rustle water."

Duane led Bullet to the place indicated, had care of his welfare, and left him there. Upon returning to the tavern porch Duane saw the group of men had been added to by others, some of whom he had seen before.

Without comment Duane walked along the edge of the road, and wherever one of the tracks of his horse showed he carefully obliterated it. This procedure was attentively watched by Fletcher and his companions.

"Wal, Dodge," remarked Fletcher, as Duane returned, "thet's safer'n prayin' fer rain."

Duane's reply was to the effect that a long, slow, monotonous ride was conducive to thirst. They all joined him, unmistakably friendly. But Knell was not there, and most assuredly not Poggin. Fletcher was no common outlaw, but, whatever his ability, it probably lay in execution of orders. Apparently at that time these men had nothing to do but drink and lounge around the tavern.

Evidently they were poorly supplied with money, though Duane observed they could borrow a peso occasionally from the bartender.

Duane set out to make himself agreeable and succeeded. There was card playing for small stakes, idle jests of coarse nature, much bantering among the younger fellows, and occasionally a mild quarrel.

All morning men came and went, until, all told, Duane calculated he had seen at least fifty. Toward the middle of the afternoon a young fellow burst into the saloon and yelled one word:

"Posse!"

From the scramble to get outdoors Duane judged that word and the ensuing action were rare in Ord.

"What the hell!" muttered Fletcher, as he gazed down the road at a dark, compact bunch of horses and riders. "Fust time I ever seen thet in Ord! We're gettin' popular like them camps out of Valentine. Wish Phil was here or Pogy. Now all you gents keep quiet. I'll do the talkin'."

The posse entered the town, trotted up on dusty horses, and halted in a bunch before the tavern. The party consisted of about twenty men, all heavily armed, and evidently in charge of a clean-cut, lean-limbed cowboy. Duane experienced considerable satisfaction at the absence of the sheriff who he had understood was to lead the posse. Perhaps he was out in another direction with a different force.

"Hello, Jim Fletcher," called the cowboy.

"Howdy," replied Fletcher.

At his short, dry response and the way he strode leisurely out before the

posse Duane found himself modifying his contempt for Fletcher. The outlaw was different now.

"Fletcher, we've tracked a man to all but three miles of this place. Tracks as plain as the nose on your face. Found his camp. Then he hit into the brush, an' we lost the trail. Didn't have no tracker with us. Think he went into the mountains. But we took a chance an' rid over the rest of the way, seein' Ord was so close. Anybody come in here late last night or early this mornin'?"

"Nope," replied Fletcher.

His response was what Duane had expected from his manner, and evidently the cowboy took it as a matter of course. He turned to the others of the posse, entering into a low consultation.

"Didn't I tell ye this was a wild-goose chase, comin' way out here?" protested an old hawk-faced rancher. "Them hoss tracks we follered ain't like any of them we seen at the water tank where the train was held up

"I'm not so sure of that," replied the leader.

"Wal, Guthrie, I've follered tracks all my life—"

"But you couldn't keep to the trail this feller made in the brush."

"Gimme time, an' I could. Thet takes time. An' heah you go hell-bent fer election! But it's a wrong lead out this way. If you're right this road agent, after he killed his pals, would hev rid back right through town. An' with them mailbags! Supposin' they was greasers? Some greasers has sense, an' when it comes to thievin' they're shore cute."

"But we ain't got any reason to believe this robber who murdered the greasers is a greaser himself. I tell

you it was a slick job done by no ordinary sneak. Didn't you hear the facts? One greaser hopped the engine an' covered the engineer an' fireman. Another greaser kept flashin' his gun outside the train. The big man who shoved back the car door an' did the killin'—he was the real gent, an' don't you forget it."

Some of the posse sided with the cowboy leader and some with the old cattleman. Finally the young leader disgustedly gathered up his bridle.

"Aw, hell! Thet sheriff shoved you off this trail. Mebbe he hed reason! Savvy thet? If I hed a bunch of cowboys with me—I tell you what—I'd take a chance an' clean up this hole!"

All the while Jim Fletcher stood quietly with his hands in his pockets. "Guthrie, I'm shore treasurin' up your friendly talk," he said, menace in the tone.

"You can—an' be damned to you, Fletcher!" called Guthrie, as the horses started.

Fletcher, standing out alone before the others of his clan, watched the posse out of sight.

"Lucky fer you-all thet Pogy wasn't here," he said as they disappeared. Then with a thoughtful mien he strode up on the porch and led Duane away from the others into the barroom. When he looked into Duane's face it was somehow an entirely changed scrutiny.

"Dodge, where'd you hide the stuff? I reckon I get in on this deal, seein' I staved off Guthrie."

Duane played his part. Here was an opportunity, and like a tiger after prey he seized it. First he coolly eyed the outlaw and then disclaimed any knowledge whatever of the train robbery

other than Fletcher had heard himself. Then at Fletcher's persistence and admiration and increasing show of friendliness he laughed occasionally and allowed himself to swell with pride, though still denying. Next he feigned a lack of consistent will power and seemed to be wavering under Fletcher's persuasion and grew silent, then surly.

Fletcher, evidently sure of ultimate victory, desisted for the time being; however, in his solicitous regard and close companionship for the rest of that day he betrayed the bent of his mind.

Later, when Duane started up, announcing his intention to get his horse and make for camp out in the brush, Fletcher seemed grievously offended.

"Why don't you stay with me? I've got a comfortable 'dobe over here. Didn't I stick by you when Guthrie an' his bunch come up? Supposin' I hedn't showed down a cold hand to him? You'd be swingin' somewhere now. I tell you, Dodge, it ain't square."

"I'll square it. I pay my debts," replied Duane. "But I can't put up here all night. If I belonged to the gang it'd be different."

"What gang?" asked Fletcher bluntly.

"Why, Cheseldine's."

Fletcher's beard nodded as his jaw dropped.

Duane laughed. "I run into him the other day. Knowed him on sight. Sure, he's the king-pin rustler. When he seen me an' asked me what reason I had for bein' on earth or some such like—why, I up an' told him."

Fletcher appeared staggered. "Who in all-fired hell air you talkin' about?"

"Didn't I tell you once? Cheseldine

—he calls himself Longstreth over there."

All of Fletcher's face not covered by hair turned a dirty white. "Cheseldine—Longstreth!" he whispered hoarsely. "God Almighty! You—you braced the—"

Then a remarkable transformation came over the outlaw. He gulped; he straightened his face; he controlled his agitation. But he could not send the healthy brown back to his face.

Duane, watching this rude man, marveled at the change in him, the sudden checking movement, the proof of a wonderful fear and loyalty. It all meant Cheseldine, a master of men!

"Who air you?" queried Fletcher in a queer, strained voice.

"You gave me a handle, didn't you? Dodge—thet's as good as any. Shore it hits me hard. Jim, I've been pretty lonely for years, an' I'm gettin' in need of pals. Think it over, will you? See you *mañana*."

The outlaw watched Duane go off after his horse, watched him as he returned to the tavern, watched him ride out into the darkness—all without a word.

Duane left the town, threaded a quiet passage through cactus and mesquite to a spot he had marked before, and made ready for the night. Luck at last was playing his game. He sensed the first slow heave of a mighty crisis. The end, always haunting, had to be sternly blotted from thought. It was the approach that needed all his mind.

He passed the night there, and late in the morning, after watching trail and road from a ridge, he returned to Ord. If Jim Fletcher tried to disguise his surprise the effort was a failure.

Certainly he had not expected to see Duane again. Duane allowed himself a little freedom with Fletcher, an attitude hitherto lacking.

That afternoon a horseman rode in from Bradford, an outlaw evidently well known and liked by his fellows, and Duane heard him say, before he could possibly have been told the train robber was in Ord, that the loss of money in the holdup was slight. Like a flash Duane saw the luck of his report. He pretended not to have heard.

In the early twilight at an opportune moment he called Fletcher to him, and, linking his arm within the outlaw's, he drew him off in a stroll to a log bridge spanning a little gully. Here after gazing around, he took out a roll of bills, spread it out, split it equally, and without a word handed one half to Fletcher.

With clumsy fingers Fletcher ran through the roll. "Five hundred!" he exclaimed. "Dodge, thet's damn handsome of you, considerin' the job wasn't—"

"Considerin' nothin'," interrupted Duane. "I'm makin' no reference to a job here or there. You did me a good turn. I split my pile. If thet doesn't make us pards, good turns an' money ain't no use in this country."

Fletcher was won.

The two men spent much time together. Duane made up a short fictitious history about himself that satisfied the outlaw, although it drew forth a laughing jest upon Duane's modesty. For Fletcher did not hide his belief that this new partner was a man of achievements. Knell and Poggin, and then Cheseldine himself, would be persuaded of this fact, so Fletcher boasted.

He had influence. He would use it. He thought he pulled a stroke with Knell. But nobody on earth, not even the boss, had any influence on Poggin. Poggin was concentrated ice part of the time; all the rest he was bursting hell. But Poggin loved a horse. He never loved anything else. He could be won with that black horse, Bullet. Cheseldine was already won by Duane's monumental nerve; otherwise he would have killed Duane.

Little by little the next few days Duane learned the points he longed to know; and how indelibly they etched themselves in his memory! Cheseldine's hiding-place was on the far slope of Mount Ord, in a deep, high-walled valley. He always went there just before a contemplated job, where he met and planned with his lieutenants. He was there in the Ord den now, getting ready to plan the biggest job yet. It was a bank robbery; but where, Fletcher had not as yet been advised.

Then, when Duane had pumped the now amenable outlaw of all details pertaining to the present, he gathered data and facts and places covering a period of ten years Fletcher had been with Cheseldine. And herewith was unfolded a history so dark in its bloody régime, so incredible in its brazen daring, so appalling in its proof of the outlaw's sweep and grasp of the country from Pecos to Rio Grande, that Duane was stunned. Compared to this Cheseldine of the Big Bend, to this rancher, stock buyer, cattle speculator, property holder, all the outlaws Duane had ever known sank into insignificance.

The power of the man stunned Duane; the strange fidelity given him amazed

Duane; the intricate inside working of his great system was equally impressive. But when Duane recovered from that the old terrible passion to kill consumed him, and it raged fiercely and it could not be checked. If that red-handed Poggin, if that cold-eyed, dead-faced Knell had only been at Ord! But they were not, and Duane with help of time got what he hoped was the upper hand of himself.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Knell and Poggin

A GAIN inaction and suspense dragged at Duane's spirit. He almost fretted. Yet something called to him over the bold, wild brow of Mount Ord. But while Fletcher stayed in Ord waiting for Knell and Poggin, or for orders, Duane knew his game was again a waiting one.

But one day there were signs of the long quiet of Ord being broken. A messenger strange to Duane rode in on a secret mission that had to do with Fletcher. When he went away Fletcher became addicted to thoughtful moods and lonely walks. He seldom drank—a striking contrast to former behavior.

The messenger came again. Whatever communication he brought, it had a remarkable effect upon the outlaw. Duane was present in the tavern when the fellow arrived, saw the few words

whispered, but did not hear them. Fletcher turned white with anger or fear, perhaps both, and he cursed like a madman.

The messenger, a lean, dark-faced, hard-riding fellow reminding Duane of the cowboy Guthrie, left the tavern without even a drink and rode away off to the west. This west mystified and fascinated Duane as much as the south beyond Mount Ord. Where were Knell and Poggin? Apparently they were not at present with the leader on the mountain.

After the messenger left Fletcher grew silent and surly. He had presented a variety of moods to Duane's observation, and this latest one was provocative of thought. Fletcher was dangerous. It became clear now that the other outlaws of the camp feared him, kept out of his way. Duane let him alone, yet closely watched him.

Perhaps an hour after the messenger had left, not longer, Fletcher manifestly arrived at some decision, and he called for his horse. Then he went to his shack and returned. He gave orders for the men in camp to keep close until he returned. Then he mounted.

"Come here, Dodge," he called.

Duane went up and laid a hand on the pommel of the saddle. Fletcher walked his horse, with Duane beside him, till they reached the log bridge, when he halted.

"Dodge, I'm in bad with Knell," he said. "An' it 'pears I'm the cause of friction between Knell an' Poggy. Knell never had any use fer me, but Poggy's been square, if not friendly. The boss has a big deal on, an' here it's been held up because of this scrap. He's waitin' over there on the mountain to give

orders to Knell or Poggy, an' neither one's showin' up. I've got to stand in the breach, an' I ain't enjoyin' the prospects."

"What's the trouble about, Jim?" asked Duane.

"Reckon it's a little about you, Dodge," said Fletcher dryly. "Knell hadn't any use fer you thet day. He ain't got no use fer a man onless he can rule him. Some of the boys here hev blabbed before I edged in with my say, an' there's hell to pay. Knell claims to know somethin' about you that'll make both the boss an' Poggy sick when he springs it. But he's keepin' quiet. Hard man to figger, thet Knell. Reckon you'd better go back to Bradford fer a day or so, then camp out near here till I come back."

"Why?"

"Wal, because there ain't any use fer you to git in bad too. The gang will ride over here any day. If they're friendly I'll light a fire on the hill there, say three nights from tonight. If you don't see it thet night you hit the trail. I'll do what I can. Jim Fletcher sticks to his pals. So long, Dodge."

Then he rode away.

He left Duane in a quandary. Here was a setback. At the moment Duane did not know which way to turn, but certainly he had no idea of going back to Bradford.

Friction between the two great lieutenants of Cheseldine! Open hostility between one of them and another of the chief's right-hand men! Among outlaws that sort of thing was deadly serious. Generally such matters were settled with guns.

Duane gathered encouragement even from disaster. Perhaps the disintegra-

tion of Cheseldine's great band had already begun. But what did Knell know? Duane did not circle around the idea with doubts and hopes; if Knell knew anything it was that this stranger in Ord, this new partner of Fletcher's, was no less than Buck Duane.

Well, it was about time, thought Duane, that he made use of his name if it were to help him at all. Duane was tempted to ride off after Fletcher and stay with him. This, however, would hardly be fair to an outlaw who had been fair to him.

Duane concluded to await developments and when the gang rode in to Ord, probably from their various hiding-places, he would be there ready to be denounced by Knell. Duane could not see any other culmination of this series of events than a meeting between Knell and himself. If that terminated fatally for Knell there was all probability of Duane's being in no worse situation than he was now. If Poggin took up the quarrel! Here Duane accused himself again—tried in vain to revolt from a judgment that he was only reasoning out excuses to meet these outlaws.

Meanwhile, instead of waiting, why not hunt up Cheseldine in his mountain retreat? The thought no sooner struck Duane than he was hurrying for his horse.

He left Ord, ostensibly toward Bradford, but, once out of sight, he turned off the road, circled through the brush, and several miles south of town he struck a narrow grass-grown trail that Fletcher had told him led to Cheseldine's camp. The horse tracks along this trail were not less than a week old, and very likely much more. It wound between low, brush-covered foothills,

through arroyos and gullies lined with mesquite, cottonwood, and scrub-oak.

In an hour Duane struck the slope of Mount Ord, and as he climbed he got a view of the rolling, blackspotted country, partly desert, partly fertile, with long, bright lines of dry stream beds winding away to grow dim in the distance. He got among broken rocks and cliffs, and here the open, downward-rolling land disappeared, and he was hard put to it to find the trail. He lost it repeatedly and made slow progress.

Finally he climbed into a region of all rock benches, rough here, smooth there, with only an occasional scratch of iron horseshoe to guide him. Many times he had to go ahead and then work to right or left till he found his way again. It was slow work; it took all day; and night found him halfway up the mountain. He halted at a little side-canyon with grass and water, and here he made camp.

The night was clear and cool at that height, with a dark-blue sky and a streak of stars blinking across. With this day of action behind him he felt better satisfied than he had been for some time. Here, on this venture, he was answering to a call that had so often directed his movements, perhaps his life, and it was one that logic or intelligence could take little stock of. And on this night, lonely like the ones he used to spend in the Nueces gorge, he felt the pressing return of old haunting things—the past so long ago, wild flights, dead faces—and the places of these were taken by one quiveringly alive, white, tragic, with its dark intent, speaking eyes—Ray Longstreth's.

That last memory he yielded to until he slept.

In the morning, satisfied that he had left still fewer tracks than he had followed up this trail, he led his horse up to the head of the canyon, there a narrow crack in low cliffs, and with branches of cedar fenced him in. Then he went back and took up the trail on foot.

Without the horse he made better time and climbed through deep clefts, wide canyons, over ridges, up shelving slopes, along precipices—a long, hard climb—till he reached a divide. Going down was easier, though the farther he followed this dim and winding trail the wider the broken battlements of rock.

Above him he saw the black fringe of piñon and pine, and above that the bold peak, bare, yellow, like a desert butte. Once, through a wide gateway between great escarpments, he saw the lower country beyond the range, and beyond this, vast and clear as it lay in his sight, was the great river that made the Big Bend. He went down and down, wondering how a horse could follow that broken trail, believing there must be another better one somewhere into Cheseldine's hiding-place.

He rounded a jutting corner and came out upon the rim of a high wall. Beneath, like a green gulf seen through blue haze, lay an amphitheater walled in on the two sides he could see. It lay perhaps a thousand feet below him; and, plain as all the other features of that wild environment, there shone out a big red stone or adobe cabin, white water shining away between great borders, and horses and cattle dotting the levels. It was a peaceful, beautiful scene.

Duane worked halfway down to the level, and, well hidden in a niche, he settled himself to watch both trail and valley. He made note of the position of the sun and saw that if anything developed or if he decided to descend any farther there was small likelihood of his getting back to his camp before dark.

Then he bent his keen eyes downward. The cabin appeared to be a crude structure. Though large in size, it had, of course, been built by outlaws.

There was no garden, no cultivated field, no corral. Excepting for the rude pile of stones and logs plastered together with mud, the valley was as wild, probably, as on the day of discovery. Duane seemed to have been watching for a long time before he saw any sign of man, and this one apparently went to the stream for water and returned to the cabin.

The sun went down behind the wall, and shadows were born in the darker places of the valley. Duane began to want to get closer to that cabin. He held back, however, trying to evolve further plans.

While he was pondering the shadows quickly gathered and darkened. If he was to go back to camp he must set out at once. Still he lingered. And suddenly his wide-roving eye caught sight of two horsemen riding up the valley. They must have entered at a point below, round the huge abutment of rock, beyond Duane's range of sight. Their horses were tired and stopped at the stream for a long drink.

Duane left his perch, took to the steep trail, and descended as fast as he could without making noise. It did

not take him long to reach the valley floor. It was almost level, with deep grass, and here and there clumps of bushes. Twilight was already thick down there.

Duane marked the location of the trail, and then began to slip like a shadow through the grass and from bush to bush. He saw a bright light before he made out the dark outline of the cabin. Then he heard voices, a merry whistle, a coarse song, and the clink of iron cooking-utensils. He smelled fragrant wood smoke. He saw moving dark figures cross the light. Evidently there was a wide door, or else the fire was out in the open.

Duane swerved to the left, out of direct line with the light, and thus was able to see better. Then he advanced noiselessly but swiftly toward the back of the house. There were trees close to the wall. He would make no noise, and he could scarcely be seen—if only there was no watchdog! But all his outlaw days he had taken risks; now he advanced stealthy and bold as an Indian.

He reached the cover of the trees, knew he was hidden in their shadows. From there he slipped up to the house and felt along the wall with his hands.

He came to a little window where light shone through. He peeped in. He saw a room shrouded in shadows, a lamp turned low, a table, chairs. He saw an open door, with bright flare beyond, but could not see the fire. Voices came indistinctly.

Without hesitation Duane stole farther along—all the way to the end of the cabin. Peeping round, he saw only the flare of light on bare ground. Retracing his cautious steps, he paused at the crack again, saw that no man

was in the room, and then he went on round that end of the cabin. Fortune favored him. There were bushes, an old shed, a woodpile, all the cover he needed at that corner.

Before he peered between the rough corner of wall and the bush growing close to it Duane paused a moment. This excitement was different from that he had always felt when pursued. It had no bitterness, no pain, no dread. There was as much danger here, perhaps more, yet it was not the same. Then he looked.

He saw a bright fire, a red-faced man bending over it, whistling, while he handled a steaming pot. Over him was a roofed shed built against the wall, with two open sides and two supporting posts. Duane's second glance, not so blinded by the sudden bright light, made out other men, three in the shadow, two in the flare, but with backs to him.

"It's a smoother trail by long odds, but ain't so short as this one right over the mountain," one outlaw was saying.

"What's eatin' you, Panhandle?" ejaculated another. "Blossom an' me rode from Faraway Springs, where Poggin is with some of the gang."

"Excuse me, Phil. Shore I didn't see you come in, an' Boldt never said nothin'."

"It took you a long time to get here, but I guess that's just as well," spoke up a smooth, suave voice with a ring in it. Longstreth's voice—Cheseldine's voice!

Here they were—Cheseldine, Phil Knell, Blossom Kane, Panhandle Smith, Boldt—how well Duane remembered the names!—all here, the big men of Cheseldine's gang, except the biggest—Poggin.

Duane sank down, controlled himself, silenced a mounting exultation, then from a less strained position he peered forth again.

The outlaws were waiting for supper. Their conversation might have been that of cowboys in camp, ranchers at a roundup. Duane listened with eager ears, waiting for the business talk that he felt would come. All the time he watched with the eyes of a wolf upon its quarry.

Blossom Kane was the lean-limbed messenger who had so angered Fletcher. Boldt was a giant in stature, dark, bearded, silent. Panhandle Smith was the red-faced cook, merry, profane, a short, bowlegged man resembling many rustlers Duane had known. And Knell, who sat there, tall, slim, like a boy in build, like a boy in years, with his pale, smooth, expressionless face and his cold, gray eyes. And Longstreth, who leaned against the wall, handsome, with his dark face and beard like an aristocrat, resembled many a rich Louisiana planter Duane had met. The sixth man sat so much in the shadow that he could not be plainly discerned, and, though addressed, his name was not mentioned.

Panhandle Smith carried pots and pans into the cabin, and cheerfully called out: "If you gents air hungry fer grub, don't look fer me to feed you with a spoon."

The outlaws piled inside, made a great bustle and clatter as they sat to their meal. Like hungry men, they talked little.

Duane got up and crept round to the other side of the cabin. After he became used to the dark again he ventured to steal along the wall to the

window and peeped in. The outlaws were in the first room and could not be seen.

Duane waited. The moments dragged endlessly. His heart pounded. Longstreth entered, turned up the light, and, taking a box of cigars from the table, he carried it out.

"Here, you fellows, go outside and smoke," he said. "Knell, come on in now. Let's get it over." He returned, sat down, and lighted a cigar for himself. He put his booted feet on the table.

Duane saw that the room was comfortably, even luxuriously furnished. There must have been a good trail, he thought, else how could all that stuff have been packed in there? Presently he heard the men go outside, and their voices became indistinct. Then Knell came in and seated himself without any of his chief's ease. He seemed preoccupied and, as always, cold.

"What's wrong, Knell? Why didn't you get here sooner?" queried Longstreth.

"Poggin, damn him! We're on the edge again."

"What for?"

"Aw, he needn't have got sore. He's breakin' a new hoss over there at Faraway, an' you know him where a hoss's concerned. That kept him, I reckon, more than anythin'."

"What else? Get it out of your system so we can go on to the new job."

"Well, it begins back a ways. I don't know how long ago—weeks—a stranger rode into Ord an' got down easy-like as if he owned the place. He seemed familiar to me. But I wasn't sure. We looked him over, an' I left, tryin' to place him in my mind."

"What'd he look like?"

"Rangy, powerful man, white hair over his temples, still, hard face, eyes like knives. The way he packed his guns, the way he walked an' stood an' swung his right hand showed me what he was. You can't fool me on the gun-sharp. An' he had a grand horse, a big black."

"I've met your man," said Longstreth.

"No!" exclaimed Knell. He laughed a short, grim, hollow laugh. "Boss, this here big gent drifts into Ord again an' makes up to Jim Fletcher. Jim, you know, is easy led. He likes men. An' when a posse come along trailin' a blind lead, huntin' the wrong way for the man who held up No. 6, why, Jim—he up an' takes this stranger to be the fly road agent an' cottons to him. Got money out of him sure. An' that's what stumps me more. What's this man's game? I happen to know, boss, that he couldn't have held up No. 6."

"How do you know?" demanded Longstreth.

"Because I did the job myself."

A dark and stormy passion clouded the chief's face.

"Damn you, Knell! Another break like that queers you with me. Did you tell Poggin?"

"Yes. That's one reason we fell out. He raved. I thought he was goin' to kill me."

"Why did you tackle such a risky job without help or plan?"

"It offered, that's all. An' it was easy. But it was a mistake. I got the country an' the railroad hollerin' for nothin'. I just couldn't help it. You know what idleness means to one of us. You know also that this very life breeds fatality. It's wrong—that's why.

I was born of good parents, an' I know what's right. We're wrong an' we can't beat the end, that's all. An' for my part I don't care a damn when that comes."

"Fine wise talk with you, Knell," said Longstreth scornfully. "Go on with your story."

"As I said, Jim cottons to the pre-tender, an' they get chummy. They're together all the time. You can gamble Jim told all he knew an' then some. A little liquor loosens his tongue. Several of the boys rode over from Ord, an' one of them went to Poggin an' says Jim Fletcher has a new man for the gang. Poggin, you know, is always ready for any new man. He says if one doesn't turn out good he can be shut off easy. He rather liked the way this new pard of Jim's was boosted. Jim an' Poggin always hit it up together. So until I got on the deal Jim's pard was already in the gang, without Poggin or you ever seein' him.

"Then I got to figurin' hard. Just where had I ever seen that chap? As it turned out, I never had seen him, which accounts for my bein' doubtful. I'd never forget any man I'd seen. I dug up a lot of old papers from my kit an' went over them. Letters, pictures, clippin's, an' all that. I guess I had a pretty good notion what I was lookin' for an' who I wanted to make sure of.

"At last I found it. An' I knew my man. But I didn't spring it on Poggin. Oh no! I want to have some fun with him when the time comes. He'll be wilder than a trapped wolf. I sent Blossom over to Ord to get word from Jim, an' when he verified all this talk I sent Blossom again with a message calculated to make Jim hump. Poggin got sore,

said he'd wait for Jim an' I could come over here to see you about the new job. He'd meet me in Ord."

Knell had spoken hurriedly and low, now and then with passion. His pale eyes glinted like fire in ice, and now his voice fell to a whisper. "Who do you think Fletcher's new man is?"

"Who?" demanded Longstreth.

"Buck Duane!"

Down came Longstreth's boots with a crash, then his body grew rigid. "That Nueces outlaw? That two-shot ace-of-spades gun-thrower who killed Bland, Alloway—?"

"An' Hardin." Knell whispered this last name with feeling.

"Yes—and Hardin, the best one of the Rim Rock fellows—Buck Duane!"

Longstreth was so ghastly white now that his black mustache seemed outlined against chalk. He eyed his grim lieutenant. They understood each other without more words. It was enough that Buck Duane was there in the Big Bend. Longstreth rose presently and reached for a flask, from which he drank, then offered it to Knell. He waved it aside.

"Knell," began the chief slowly, as he wiped his lips, "I gathered you have some grudge against this Buck Duane."

"Yes."

"Well, don't be a damn fool now and do what Poggin or almost any of you men would—don't meet this Buck Duane. I've reason to believe he's a Texas Ranger now."

"The hell you say!"

"Yes. Go to Ord and give Jim Fletcher a hunch. He'll get Poggin, and they'll fix even Buck Duane."

"All right. I'll do my best. But if I run into Duane—"

"Don't run into him!" Longstreth's voice fairly rang with the force of its passion and command. He wiped his face, drank again from the flask, sat down, resumed his smoking, and drawing a paper from his vest pocket, he began to study it.

"Well, I'm glad that's settled," he said. "Now for the new job. This is October the eighteenth. On or before the twenty-fifth there will be a shipment of gold reach the Rancher's Bank of Val Verde. After you return to Ord give Poggin these orders. Keep the gang quiet. You, Poggin, Kane, Fletcher, Panhandle Smith, and Boldt to be in on the secret and the job. Nobody else. You'll leave Ord on the twenty-third, ride across country by the trail till you get within sight of Mercer. It's a hundred miles from Bradford to Val Verde—about the same from Ord.

"Time your travel to get you near Val Verde on the morning of the twenty-sixth. You won't have to more than trot your horses. At two o'clock in the afternoon ride into town and up to the Rancher's Bank. Val Verde's a pretty big town. Never been any holdups there. Town feels safe. Make it a clean, fast, daylight job. That's all. Have you got the details?"

Knell did not even ask for the dates again.

"Suppose Poggin or me might be detained?" he asked.

Longstreth bent a dark glance upon his lieutenant.

"You never can tell what'll come off," continued Knell. "I'll do my best."

"The minute you see Poggin tell

him. A job on hand steadies him. And I say again—look to it that nothing happens. Either you or Poggin carry the job through. But I want both of you in it. Break for the hills, and when you get up in the rocks where you can hide your tracks head for Mount Ord. When all's quiet again I'll join you here. That's all. Call in the boys."

Like a swift shadow and as noiseless Duane stole across the level toward the dark wall of rock. Every nerve was a strung wire. For a little while his mind was cluttered and clogged with whirling thoughts from which, like a flashing scroll, unrolled the long, baffling order of action.

The game was now in his hands. He must cross Mount Ord at night. The feat was improbable, but it might be done. He must ride into Bradford, forty miles from the foothills, before eight o'clock next morning. He must telegraph MacNelly to be in Val Verde on the twenty-fifth. He must ride back to Ord, to intercept Knell, face him, be denounced, kill him, and while the iron was hot strike hard to win Poggin's half-won interest as he had wholly won Fletcher's. Failing that last, he must let the outlaws alone to bide their time in Ord, to be free to ride on to their new job in Val Verde. In the meantime he must plan to arrest Longstreth.

Under the wall the shadows were black, only the tips of trees and crags showing, yet he went straight to the trail. It was merely a grayness between borders of black. He climbed and never stopped. It did not seem steep. His feet might have had eyes. He surmounted the wall, and, looking down into the ebony gulf pierced by one point of light, he lifted a menacing arm and shook it.

Then he strode on and did not falter till he reached the huge shelving cliffs. Here he lost the trail; there was none; but he remembered the shapes, the points, the notches of rock above. Before he reached the ruins of splintered ramparts and jumbles of broken walls the moon topped the eastern slope of the mountain, and the mystifying blackness he had dreaded changed to magic silver light. It seemed as light as day, only soft, mellow, and the air held a transparent sheen.

He ran up the bare ridges and down the smooth slopes, and, like a goat, jumped from rock to rock. In this light he knew his way and lost no time looking for a trail. He crossed the divide and then had all downhill before him. Swiftly he descended, almost always sure of his memory of the landmarks. He did not remember having studied them in the ascent, yet here they were, even in changed light, familiar to his sight. What he had once seen was pictured on his mind. And, true as a deer striking for home, he reached the canyon where he had left his horse.

Bullet was quickly and easily found. Duane threw on the saddle and pack, cinched them tight, and resumed his descent. Bare downward steps in rock, sliding, weathered slopes, narrow black gullies, a thousand openings in a maze of broken stone—these Duane had to descend in fast time, leading a giant of a horse. Bullet cracked the loose fragments, sent them rolling, slid on the scaly slopes, plunged down the steps, followed like a faithful dog at Duane's heels.

Hours passed as moments. Duane could not quell that self in him which reached back over the lapse of lonely,

searing years and found the boy in him. He who had been worse than dead was now grasping at the skirts of life—which meant victory, honor, happiness. Duane knew he was not just right in part of his mind. Small wonder that he was not insane, he thought!

He tramped on downward, his marvelous faculty for covering rough ground and holding to the true course never before even in flight so keen and acute. Yet all the time a spirit was keeping step with him. Thought of Ray Longstreth as he had left her made him weak. But now, with the game clear to its end, with the trap to spring, with success strangely haunting him, Duane could not dispel memory of her. He saw her white face, with its sweet sad lips and the dark eyes so tender and tragic. And time and distance and risk and toil were nothing.

The moon sloped to the west. Shadows of trees and crags now crossed to the other side of him. The stars dimmed. Then he was out of the rocks, with the dim trail pale at his feet. Mounting Bullet, he made short work of the long slope and the foothills and the rolling land leading down to Ord. The little outlaw camp, with its shacks and cabins and row of houses, lay silent and dark under the paling moon.

Duane passed by on the lower trail, headed into the road, and put Bullet to a gallop. He watched the dying moon, the waning stars, and the east. He had time to spare, so he saved the horse. Knell would be leaving the rendezvous about the time Duane turned back toward Ord. Between noon and sunset they would meet.

The night wore on. The moon sank behind low mountains in the west. The stars brightened for a while, then

faded. Gray gloom enveloped the world, thickened, lay like smoke over the road. Then shade by shade it lightened, until through the transparent obscurity shone a dim light.

Duane reached Bradford before dawn. He dismounted some distance from the tracks, tied his horse, and then crossed over to the station. He heard the clicking of the telegraph instrument, and it thrilled him. An operator sat inside reading. When Duane tapped on the window he looked up with startled glance, then went swiftly to unlock the door.

"Hello. Give me paper and pencil. Quick," whispered Duane.

With trembling hands the operator complied, Duane wrote out the message he had carefully composed.

"Send this—repeat it to make sure—then keep mum. I'll see you again. Good-by."

The operator stared, but did not speak a word.

Duane left as stealthily and swiftly as he had come. He walked his horse a couple of miles back on the road and then rested him till break of day. When the east began to redden, Duane turned grimly in the direction of Ord.

When Duane swung into the wide, grassy square on the outskirts of Ord he saw a bunch of saddled horses hitched in front of the tavern. He knew what that meant. Luck still favored him. The rest was a matter of how greatly he could make his power felt. An open conflict against odds lay in the balance. That would be fatal to him, and to avoid it he had to trust to his name and a presence he must make terrible.

There was not an outlaw in sight. The dusty horses had covered distance

that morning. As Duane dismounted he heard loud, angry voices inside the tavern. He removed coat and vest, hung them over the pommel. He packed two guns, one belted high on the left hip, the other swinging low on the right side. He pushed the door and stepped inside.

The big room was full of men, and every face pivoted toward him, Knell's pale face flashed into Duane's swift sight; then Boldt's, then Blossom Kane's, then Panhandle Smith's, then Fletcher's, then others that were familiar, and last that of Poggin. Though Duane had never seen Poggin or heard him described, he knew him—for he saw a face that was a record of great and evil deeds.

There was absolute silence. The outlaws were lined back of a long table upon which were papers, stacks of silver coin, a bundle of bills, and a huge gold-mounted gun.

"Are you gents lookin' for me?" asked Duane. He gave his voice all the ringing force and power of which he was capable.

Knell stood quivering, but his face might have been a mask. The other outlaws looked from him to Duane. Jim Fletcher flung up his hands.

"My Gawd, Dodge, what'd you bust in here fer?" he said plaintively, and slowly stepped forward. His action meant he had been sponsor for Duane and now he would stand by him.

"Back, Fletcher!" called Duane, and his voice made the outlaw jump.

"Hold on, Dodge, an' you-all, everybody," said Fletcher. "Let me talk, seein' I'm in wrong here."

"Go ahead. Talk," said Poggin.

Fletcher turned to Duane. "Pard, I'm takin' it on myself thet you meet

enemies here when I swore you'd meet friends. It's my fault. I'll stand by you if you let me."

"No, Jim," replied Duane.

"But what'd you come fer without the signal?" burst out Fletcher.

"Jim, I ain't pressin' my company none. But when I'm wanted bad—"

Fletcher stopped him with a raised hand. Then he turned to Poggin with a rude dignity.

"Poggy, he's my pard, an' he's riled. I never told him a word thet'd make him sore. I only said Knell hadn't no more use fer him than fer me. Now, what you say goes in this gang. I never failed you in my life. Here's my pard. I vouch fer him. Will you stand fer me? There's goin' to be hell if you don't—an' us with a big job on hand!"

While Fletcher toiled over his slow, earnest persuasion Duane had his gaze riveted upon Poggin. There was something leonine about Poggin. He was tawny. He blazed. He seemed beautiful as fire was beautiful. He was of perfect build, with muscles that swelled and rippled, bulging his clothes, with the magnificent head and face of the cruel, fierce, tawny-eyed jaguar.

Looking at Poggin, instinctively divining his abnormal power, Duane had for the first time in his life the inward quaking fear of a man. It was like a cold-tongued bell ringing within him and numbing his heart. The old instinctive firing of blood followed, but did not drive away that fear. He felt something here deeper than thought could go—and he hated Poggin.

That individual had been considering Fletcher's appeal. "Jim, I ante up," he said, "an' if Phil doesn't raise us out

with a big hand—why, he'll get called, an' your pard can set in the game."

Every eye shifted to Knell. He was dead-white. He laughed, and any one hearing that laugh would have realized his intense anger equally with an assurance which made him master of the situation.

"Poggin, you're a gambler, you are—the ace-high, straight-flush hand of the Big Bend," he said with stinging scorn. "I'll bet you my roll to a greaser peso that I can deal you a hand you'll be afraid to play."

"Phil, you're talkin' wild," growled Poggin.

"If there's anythin' you hate it's a man who pretends to be somebody else when he's not. That so?"

Poggin nodded in slow-gathering wrath.

"Well, Jim's new pard—this man Dodge—he's not who he seems. Oh-ho! He's a hell of a lot different. But I know him. An' when I spring his name on you, Poggin, you'll freeze to your gizzard. Do you get me? You'll freeze, an' your hand'll be stiff when it ought to be lightnin'—all because you'll realize you've been standin' there five minutes—five minutes *alive* before him!"

Hate manifested itself in Knell's scornful, fiery address, in the shaking hand he thrust before Poggin's face. In the ensuing silent pause Knell's panting could be plainly heard. The other men were pale, watchful, cautiously edging either way to the wall, leaving the principals and Duane in the center of the room.

"Spring his name, then, you—" said Poggin violently, with a curse.

Strangely Knell did not even look at the man he was about to denounce. He leaned toward Poggin, his hands,

his body, his long head all somewhat expressive of what his face disguised.

"Buck Duane!" he yelled suddenly.

The name did not make any great difference in Poggin. But Knell's passionate, swift utterance carried the suggestion that the name ought to bring Poggin to quick action. It was possible, too, that Knell's manner, the import of his denunciation, the meaning back of all his passion held Poggin bound more than the surprise. For the outlaw certainly was surprised, perhaps staggered at the idea that he, Poggin, had been about to stand sponsor with Fletcher for a famous outlaw hated and feared by all outlaws.

Knell waited a long moment, and then his face broke its cold immobility in an extraordinary expression of devilish glee. He had hounded the great Poggin into something that gave him vicious, monstrous joy.

"BUCK DUANE! Yes," he broke out hotly, "the Nueces gunman! That two-shot, ace-of-spades lone wolf! You an' I—we've heard a thousand times of him—talked about him often. An' here he is *in front* of you! Poggin, you were backin' Fletcher's new pard, Buck Duane. An' he'd fooled you both but for me. But I know him. An' I know why he drifted in here. To flash a gun on Cheseldine—on you—on me! Bah! Don't tell me he wanted to join the gang. You know a gunman, for you're one yourself. Don't you always want to kill another man? An' don't you always want to meet a real man, not a fourflush?

"Well, Duane faced you—called you! An' when I sprung his name, what ought you have done? Did you throw your gun, swift, like you have so often? Naw; you froze. An' why? Because

here's a man with the kind of nerve you'd love to have. Because he's great—meetin' us here alone. Because you an' I an' every damned man here had to take his front, each to himself. If we all drew we'd kill him. Sure! But who's goin' to lead? Who was goin' to be first? Who was goin' to make him draw? Not you, Poggin! You leave that for a lesser man—me—who've lived to see you a coward. It comes once to every gunman. You've met your match in Buck Duane. An', by God I'm glad! Here's once I show you up!"

The hoarse, taunting voice failed. Knell stepped back from the comrade he hated. He was wet, shaking, haggard, but magnificent.

"Buck Duane, do you remember Hardin?" he asked in scarcely audible voice.

"Yes," replied Duane.

"You met him—forced him to draw—killed him?"

"Yes."

"Hardin was the best pard I ever had." His teeth clicked together tight, and his lips set in a thin line.

The room grew still. Even breathing ceased. The time for words had passed. In that long moment of suspense Knell's body gradually stiffened, and at last the quivering ceased. He crouched. His eyes had a soul-piercing fire.

Duane watched them. He waited. He caught the thought—the breaking of Knell's muscle-bound rigidity. Then he drew.

Through the smoke of his gun he saw two red spurts of flame. Knell's bullets thudded into the ceiling. He fell with a scream like a wild thing in agony.

Duane did not see Knell die. He watched Poggin. And Poggin, like a

stricken and astounded man, looked down upon his prostrate comrade.

Fletcher ran at Duane with hands aloft. "Hit the trail, you liar, or you'll hev to kill me!" he yelled. With hands still up, he shouldered and bodied Duane out of the room.

Duane leaped on his horse, spurred, and plunged away.

CHAPTER NINE

Lawson's Gun

DUANE returned to Fairdale and camped in the mesquite till the twenty-third of the month. The few days seemed endless.

All he could think of was that the hour in which he must disgrace Ray Longstreth was slowly but inexorably coming. In that waiting time he learned what love was and also duty.

When the day at last dawned he rode like one possessed down the rough slope, hurdling the stones and crashing through the brush, with a sound in his ears that was not all the rush of the wind. Something dragged at him.

Apparently one side of his mind was unalterably fixed, while the other was a hurrying conglomeration of flashes of thought, reception of sensations. He could not get calmness. By and by, almost involuntarily, he hurried on faster. Action seemed to make his state less oppressive; it eased the weight. But the farther he went on the harder it was to continue.

There seemed no use to go on farther until he was absolutely sure of himself. Such work as seemed haunting and driving him could never be carried out in the mood under which he labored. He hung on to that thought. Several times he slowed up, then stopped, only to go on again.

At length, as he mounted a low ridge, Fairdale lay bright and green before him not far away, and the sight was a conclusive check. There were mesquites on the ridge, and Duane sought the shade beneath them. It was the noon hour, with hot, glary sun and no wind. Here Duane had to have out his fight.

Duane was utterly unlike himself; he could not bring the old self back; he was not the same man he once had been. But he could understand why—it was because of Ray Longstreth. Temptation assailed him. To have her his wife! It was impossible. The thought was insidiously alluring.

Duane pictured a home. He saw himself riding through the cotton and rice and cane, home to a stately old mansion, where long-eared hounds bayed him welcome, and a woman looked for him and met him with happy and beautiful smile. There might—there would be children—Ray their mother! The kind of a life a lonely outcast always yearned for and never had! He saw it all, felt it all.

But beyond and above all other claims came Captain MacNelly's. It was then there was something cold and deathlike in Duane's soul. For he knew, whatever happened, of one thing he was sure—he would have to kill either Longstreth or Lawson. Longstreth might be trapped into arrest; but Lawson had no sense, no control, no fear. He would

snarl like a panther and go for his gun, and he would have to be killed.

Duane came out of it all bitter and callous and sore—in the most fitting of moods to undertake a difficult and deadly enterprise. He had fallen upon his old strange, futile dreams, now rendered poignant by reason of love. He drove away those dreams. In their places came the images of the olive-skinned Longstreth with his sharp eyes, and the dark, evil-faced Lawson, and then returned tenfold more thrilling and sinister the old strange passion to meet Poggin.

It was about one o'clock when Duane rode into Fairdale. The streets for the most part were deserted. He went directly to find Morton and Zimmer. He found them at length, restless, somber, anxious, but unaware of the part he had played at Ord. They said Longstreth was home, too. It was possible that Longstreth had arrived home in ignorance.

Duane told them to be on hand in town with their men in case he might need them, and then with teeth locked he set off for Longstreth's ranch.

Duane stole through the bushes and trees, and when nearing the porch he heard loud, angry, familiar voices. Longstreth and Lawson were quarreling again. Duane had no plan of action, but he meant to take any risk rather than kill Longstreth. Both of the men were out on the porch. Duane wormed his way to the edge of the shrubbery and crouched low to watch for his opportunity.

Longstreth looked haggard and thin. He was in his shirt sleeves, and he had come out with a gun in his hand. This he laid on a table near the wall. He wore no belt.

Lawson was red, bloated, thick-lipped, all fiery and sweaty from drink, though

sober on the moment, and he had the expression of a desperate man in his last stand.

"What's your news? You needn't be afraid of my feelings," said Lawson.

"Ray confessed to an interest in this ranger," replied Longstreth.

Duane thought Lawson would choke. The rush of blood made him tear at the soft collar of his shirt. Duane awaited his chance, patient, cold, all his feelings shut in a vise.

"But *why* should your daughter meet this ranger?" demanded Lawson harshly.

"She's in love with him, and he's in love with her."

Duane reveled in Lawson's condition. The statement might have had the force of a juggernaut. Was Longstreth sincere? What was his game?

Lawson, finding his voice, cursed Ray, cursed the ranger, then Longstreth.

"You damned selfish fool!" cried Longstreth in deep, bitter scorn. "All you think of is yourself—your loss of the girl, Think once of *me*—my home—my life!"

Then the connection subtly put out by Longstreth apparently dawned upon the other. Somehow through this girl her father and cousin were to be betrayed.

"To hell with you!" burst out Lawson incoherently. He was frenzied. "I'll have her, or nobody else will!"

"You never will," returned Longstreth stridently. "So help me God I'd rather see her the ranger's wife than yours!"

While Lawson absorbed that shock Longstreth leaned toward him, all of hate and menace in his mien.

"Lawson, you made me what I am,"

continued Longstreth. "I backed you—shielded you. *You're* Cheseldine—if the truth is told! Now it's ended. I quit you. I'm done!"

Their gray passioned-corded faces were still as stones.

"*Gentlemen!*" Duane called in far-reaching voice, as he stepped out. "*You're both done!*"

They wheeled to confront Duane.

"Don't move! Not a muscle! Not a finger!" he warned.

Longstreth read what Lawson had not the mind to read. His face turned from gray to ashen.

"What d'ye mean?" yelled Lawson fiercely, shrilly. It was not in him to obey a command, to see impending death.

Duane raised his left hand to turn back a lapel of his open vest. The silver star flashed brightly.

Lawson howled like a dog. With barbarous and insane fury, with sheer impotent folly, he swept a clawing hand for his gun. Duane's shot broke his action.

Before Lawson even tottered, before he loosed the gun, Longstreth leaped behind him, clasped him with left arm, quick as lightning jerked the gun from both clutching fingers and sheath. Longstreth protected himself with the body of the dead man.

Duane saw red flashes, puffs of smoke; he heard quick reports. Something stung his left arm. Then a blow like wind, light of sound yet shocking in impact, struck him, staggered him. The hot rend of lead followed the blow. Duane's heart seemed to explode, yet his mind kept extraordinarily clear and rapid.

Duane heard Longstreth work the action of Lawson's gun. He heard the

hammer click, fall upon empty shells. Longstreth cursed as a man cursed at defeat. Duane waited, cool and sure now.

Longstreth tried to lift the dead man, to edge him closer toward the table where his own gun lay. But, considering the peril of exposing himself, he found the task beyond him. He bent, peering at Duane under Lawson's arm, which flopped out from his side. Longstreth's eyes were the eyes of a man who meant to kill. There was never any mistaking the strange and terrible light of eyes like those. More than once Duane had a chance to aim at them, at the top of Longstreth's head, at a strip of his side.

Longstreth flung Lawson's body off. But even as it dropped, before Longstreth could leap, as he surely intended, for the gun, Duane covered him, called piercingly to him:

"Don't jump for the gun! Don't! I'll kill you! Sure as God I'll kill you!"

Longstreth stood perhaps ten feet from the table where his gun lay. Duane saw him calculating chances. He was game. Duane just saw him measure the distance to that gun—he was magnificent; he meant to do it. Duane would have to kill him.

"Longstreth, listen," cried Duane swiftly. "The game's up. You're done. But think of your daughter! I'll spare your life—I'll try to get you freedom on one condition. For her sake! I've got you nailed—all the proofs. There lies Lawson. You're alone. I've Morton and men to my aid. Give up. Maybe I can persuade MacNelly to let you go free back to your old country. It's for Ray's sake! Her life, perhaps her happiness, can be saved! Hurry, man! Your answer!"

"Suppose I refuse?" Longstreth queried with a dark and terrible earnestness.

"Then I'll kill you in your tracks! You can't move a hand! Your word or death! Hurry, Longstreth! Be a man! For her sake! Quick! Another second now—I'll kill you!"

"All right, Buck Duane, I give my word," he said, and deliberately walked to the chair and fell into it.

Longstreth looked strangely at the bloody blot on Duane's shoulder. "There come the girls!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Can you help me drag Lawson inside? They mustn't see him."

Duane was facing down the porch toward the court and corrals. Miss Longstreth and Ruth had come in sight, were swiftly approaching, evidently alarmed. The two men succeeded in drawing Lawson into the house before the girls saw him.

"Duane, you're not hard hit?" said Longstreth.

"Reckon not," replied Duane.

"I'm sorry. If only you could have told me sooner! Lawson, damn him! Always I've split over him!"

"But the last time, Longstreth."

"Yes, and I came near driving you to kill me, too. Duane, you talked me out of it. For Ray's sake! She'll be in here in a minute. This'll be harder than facing a gun."

"Hard now. But I hope it'll turn out all right."

"Duane, will you do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"Let Ray and Ruth think Lawson shot you. He's dead. It can't matter. Duane, the old side of my life is coming back. It's been coming. And, by God, I'd change places with Lawson if I could!"

"Glad you—said that, Longstreth," replied Duane. "And sure—Lawson plugged me. It's our secret."

Just then Ray and Ruth entered the room. Duane heard two low cries, so different in tone, and he saw two white faces. Ray came to his side. She lifted a shaking hand to point at the blood upon his breast. White and mute, she gazed from that to her father.

"Papa!" cried Ray, wringing her hands.

"Don't give way," he replied huskily. "Both you girls will need your nerve. Duane isn't badly hurt. But Floyd is—is dead. Listen. Let me tell it quick. There's been a fight. It—it was Lawson—it was Lawson's gun that shot Duane. Duane let me off. In fact, Ray, he saved me. I'm to divide my property—return so far as possible what I've stolen—leave Texas at once with Duane, under arrest. He says maybe he can get MacNelly, the ranger captain, to let me go. For your sake!"

She stood there, realizing her deliverance, with the dark and tragic glory of her eyes passing from her father to Duane.

"You must rise above this," said Duane to her. "I expected this to ruin you. But your father is alive. He will live it down. I'm sure I can promise you he'll be free. Perhaps back there in Louisiana the dishonor will never be known. This country is far from your old home. And even in San Antonio and Austin a man's evil reputation means little. Then the line between a rustler and a rancher is hard to draw in these wild border days. Rustling is stealing cattle, and I once heard a well-known rancher say that all rich cattlemen had done a little stealing."

"Your father drifted out here, and

like a good many others, he succeeded. It's perhaps just as well not to split hairs, to judge him by the law and morality of a civilized country. Some way or other he drifted in with bad men. I'm sure in his case he never realized where he was drifting.

"Then one thing led to another, until he was face to face with dealing that took on crooked form. To protect himself he bound men to him. Many gangs have developed that way out here. He could not control them. He became involved with them. And eventually their dealings became deliberately and boldly dishonest. That meant the inevitable spilling of blood sooner or later, and so he grew into the leader because he was the strongest. Whatever he is to be judged for, I think he could have been infinitely worse."

CHAPTER TEN

Gunsmoke

ON the morning of the twenty-sixth Duane rode into Bradford in time to catch the early train.

His wounds did not seriously incapacitate him. Longstreth was with him. And Miss Longstreth and Ruth Herbert would not be left behind. They were all leaving Fairdale forever.

Longstreth had turned over the whole of his property to Morton, who was to divide it as he and his comrades believed just. Duane had left Fairdale with his

party by night, passed through Sanderson in the early hours of dawn, and reached Bradford as he had planned.

That fateful morning found Duane outwardly calm, but inwardly he was in a tumult. He wanted to rush to Val Verde. Would Captain MacNelly be there with his rangers, as Duane had planned for them to be? Memory of that tawny Poggin returned with strange passion. Duane had borne hours and weeks and months of waiting, but now he had no patience. The whistle of the train made him leap.

Duane, disliking to face Longstreth and the passengers in the car, changed his seat to one behind his prisoner. They had seldom spoken. Longstreth sat with bowed head, deep in thought. The girls sat in a seat near by and were pale but composed. The latter half of that ride Duane had observed a wagon road running parallel with the railroad, sometimes right alongside, at others near or far away.

When the train was about twenty miles from Val Verde Duane espied a dark group of horsemen trotting eastward. His blood beat like a hammer at his temples. The gang! He thought he recognized the tawny Poggin and felt a strange inward contraction. He thought he recognized the clean-cut Blossom Kane, the black-bearded giant Boldt, the red-faced Panhandle Smith, and Fletcher. There was another man strange to him.

Duane leaned over the seat and touched Longstreth on the shoulder. "Look!" he whispered.

Cheseldine was stiff. He had already seen.

The train flashed by; the outlaw gang receded out of range of sight.

"Did you notice Knell wasn't with them?" whispered Duane. He did not speak to Longstreth again till the train stopped at Val Verde.

They got off the car, and the girls followed as naturally as ordinary travelers. The station was a good deal larger than that at Bradford, and there were considerable action and bustle incident to the arrival of the train.

Duane's sweeping gaze searched faces, rested upon a man who seemed familiar. This fellow's look, too, was that of one who knew Duane, but was waiting for a sign, a cue. Then Duane recognized him—MacNelly, clean-shaven. Without mustache he appeared different, younger.

When MacNelly saw that Duane intended to greet him, to meet him, he hurried forward. A keen light flashed from his eyes. He was glad, eager, yet suppressing himself, and the glances he sent back and forth from Duane to Longstreth were questioning, doubtful.

"Duane! Lord, I'm glad to see you," was the captain's greeting. Then at closer look into Duane's face his warmth fled—something he saw there checked his enthusiasm, or at least its utterance.

"MacNelly, shake hands with Cheseldine," said Duane, low-voiced.

The ranger captain stood dumb, motionless. But he saw Longstreth's instant action, and awkwardly he reached for the outstretched hand.

"Any of your men down here?" queried Duane sharply.

"No. They're uptown."

"Come. MacNelly, you walk with him. We've ladies in the party. I'll come behind with them."

They set off uptown. Longstreth walked as if he were with friends on the way to

dinner. The girls were mute. MacNelly walked like a man in a trance. There was not a word spoken in four blocks.

Presently Duane espied a stone building on a corner of the broad street. There was a big sign, *Rancher's Bank*.

"There's the hotel," said MacNelly. "Some of my men are there. We've scattered around."

They crossed the street, went through office and lobby, and then Duane asked MacNelly to take them to a private room. When they were all inside Duane closed the door, and, drawing a deep breath as if of relief, he faced them calmly.

"Miss Longstreth, you and Miss Ruth try to make yourselves comfortable now," he said. "And don't be distressed." Then he turned to his captain. "MacNelly, this girl is the daughter of the man I've brought to you, and this one is his niece."

Then Duane briefly related Longstreth's story, and, though he did not spare the rustler chief, he was generous.

"When I went after Longstreth," concluded Duane, "it was either to kill him or offer him freedom on conditions. So I chose the latter for his daughter's sake. He has already disposed of all his property. He's to leave Texas never to return. The name Cheseldine has been a mystery, and now it'll fade."

A few moments later Duane followed MacNelly to a large room, like a hall, and here were men reading and smoking. Duane knew them—rangers!

MacNelly beckoned to his men. "Boys, here he is."

"How many men have you?" asked Duane.

"Fifteen."

MacNelly glowed, he sputtered, he tried to talk, to wave his hands. He was beside himself. And his rangers crowded

closer, eager, like hounds ready to run. They all talked at once, and the word most frequent in their speech was "outlaws."

MacNelly clapped his fist in his hand. "This'll make the adjutant sick with joy. Maybe we won't have it on the governor! We'll show them about the ranger service. Duane, how'd you ever do it?"

"Now, Captain, not the half nor the quarter of this job's done. The gang's coming down the road. I saw them from the train. They'll ride into town on the dot—two-thirty."

"How many?" asked MacNelly.

"Poggin, Blossom Kane, Panhandle Smith, Boldt, Jim Fletcher, and another man I don't know. These are the picked men of Cheseldine's gang. I'll bet they'll be the fastest, hardest bunch you rangers ever faced."

"Poggin—that's the hard nut to crack! I've heard their records since I've been in Val Verde. Where's Knell? They say he's a boy, but hell and blazes!"

"Knell's dead."

"Ah!" exclaimed MacNelly softly. Then he grew businesslike, cool, and of harder aspect. "Duane, it's your game today. I'm only a ranger under orders. We're all under your orders. Make your plan quick, so I can go around and post the boys who're not here."

"You understand there's no sense in trying to arrest Poggin, Kane, and that lot?" queried Duane.

"No, I don't understand that," replied MacNelly bluntly.

"It can't be done. The drop can't be got on such men. If you meet them they shoot, and mighty quick and straight. Poggin! That outlaw has no equal with a gun—unless— He's got to be killed quick. They'll all have to be killed. They're

all bad, desperate, know no fear, are lightning in action."

"Very well, Duane; then it's a fight. That'll be easier, perhaps. The boys are spoiling for a fight. Out with your plan, now."

"Put one man at each end of this street, just at the edge of town. Let him hide there with a rifle to block the escape of any outlaw that we might fail to get. I had a good look at the bank building. It's well situated for our purpose. Put four men up in that room over the bank—four men, two at each open window. Let them hide till the game begins. They want to be there so in case these foxy outlaws get wise before they're down on the ground or inside the bank. The rest of your men put inside behind the counters, where they'll hide."

"Now go over to the bank, spring the thing on the bank officials, and don't let them shut up the bank. You want their aid. Let them make sure of their gold. But the clerks and cashier ought to be at their desks or window when Poggin rides up. He'll glance in before he gets down. We must be slicker than they are. When you get the bank people wise, send your men over one by one. No hurry, no excitement, no unusual thing to attract notice in the bank."

"All right. That's great. Tell me, where do you intend to wait?"

Duane heard MacNelly's question, and it struck him peculiarly. He had seemed to be planning and speaking mechanically. The fact nonplussed him and he became thoughtful.

"Where'll you wait, Duane?" insisted MacNelly, with keen eyes speculating.

"I'll wait in front—just inside the door," replied Duane with an effort.

"Why?" demanded the Captain.

"Well," began Duane slowly. "Poggin will get down first and start in. But the others won't be far behind. They'll not get swift till inside. The thing is—they *mustn't* get clear inside, because the instant they do they'll pull guns. That means death to somebody. If we can we want to stop them just at the door."

"There's a wide-open doorway, a sort of round hall, a vestibule, with steps leading up to the bank. There's a door in the vestibule, too. It leads somewhere. We can put men in there. You can be there," said MacNelly.

Duane was silent.

"See here, Duane," began MacNelly nervously. "You sha'n't take any undue risk here. You'll hide with the rest of us?"

"No!" The word was wrenched from Duane.

MacNelly stared, and then a strange, comprehending light seemed to flit over his face.

"Duane, I can give you no orders today," he said distinctly. "I'm only offering advice. Need you take any more risks? You've done a grand job for the service—already. You've paid me a thousand times for that pardon. You've redeemed yourself. The governor and the adjutant general—the whole state will rise up and honor you. The game's almost up. We'll kill these outlaws, or enough of them to break their power forever. I say, as a ranger, need you take more risk than your captain?"

Still Duane remained silent. He was locked between two forces. And one, a tide that was bursting at its bounds, seemed about to overwhelm him. Finally that side of him, the retreating self, the weaker, found a voice.

"Captain, you want this job to be sure?" he asked.

"Certainly."

"I've told you the way. I alone know the kind of men to be met. Just *what* I'll do or *where* I'll be I can't say yet. In meetings like this the moment decides. But I'll be there!"

MacNelly spread wide his hands and shook his head. "Now you've done your work—laid the trap—is this strange move of yours going to be fair to Miss Longstreth?"

Like a great tree chopped at the roots Duane vibrated to that. He looked up as if he had seen a ghost.

Mercilessly the ranger captain went on: "You can win her, Duane! Oh, you can't fool me. I was wise in a minute. Fight with us from cover—then go back to her. You will have served the Texas Rangers as no other man has. I'll accept your resignation. You'll be free, honored, happy. That girl loves you! I saw it in her eyes. She's—"

But Duane cut him short with a fierce gesture. He lunged up to his feet, and the rangers fell back. Dark, silent, grim as he had been, still there was a transformation singularly more sinister, stranger.

"Enough. I'm done," he said somberly. "I've planned. Do we agree—or shall I meet Poggin and his gang alone?"

MacNelly cursed and again threw up his hands, this time in baffled chagrin. There was deep regret in his dark eyes as they rested upon Duane.

Duane was left alone.

Never had his mind been so clear in its understanding of what had heretofore been elusive impulses of his strange nature. His determination was to meet

Poggin; meet him before any one else had a chance—Poggin first—and then the others! He was unalterable in that decision.

Why? Then came realization. He was not a ranger now. He cared nothing for the state. He had no thought of freeing the community of a dangerous outlaw, of ridding the country of an obstacle to its progress and prosperity. He wanted to kill Poggin. It was significant now that he forgot the other outlaws. He was the gunman, the gunthrower, the gunfighter, passionate and terrible.

His father's blood, that dark and fierce strain, his mother's spirit, that strong and unquenchable spirit of the surviving pioneer—these had been in him; and the killings, one after another, the wild and haunted years, had made him, absolutely in spite of his will, the gunman. He realized it now, bitterly, hopelessly. The thing he had intelligence enough to hate he had become. At last he shuddered under the driving, ruthless, inhuman blood lust of the gunman.

Long ago he had seemed to seal in a tomb that horror of his kind—the need, in order to forget the haunting, sleepless presence of his last victim, to go out and kill another. But it was still there in his mind, and now it stalked out, worse, more powerful, magnified by its rest, augmented by the violent passions of that strange, wild product of the Texas frontier—the gunfighter. And those passions were so violent, so raw, so base, so much lower than what ought to have existed in a thinking man. Actual pride of his record! Actual vanity in his speed with a gun! Actual jealousy of any rival!

Duane could not believe it. But there he was, without a choice. What he had feared for years had become a monstrous

reality. Respect for himself, blindness, a certain honor that he had clung to while in outlawry—all, like scales, seemed to fall away from him. He stood stripped bare, his soul naked—the soul of Cain.

Always since the first brand had been forced and burned upon him he had been ruined. But now with conscience flayed to the quick, yet utterly powerless over this tiger instinct, he was lost. He admitted it. And at the utter abasement the soul he despised suddenly leaped and quivered with the thought of Ray Longstreth.

Then came agony. As he could not govern all the chances of this fatal meeting—as all his swift and deadly genius must be occupied with Poggin, perhaps in vain—as hard-shooting men whom he could not watch would be close behind, this almost certainly must be the end of Buck Duane. That did not matter. But he loved the girl. He wanted her.

At that moment the door opened, and Ray Longstreth entered. "Duane," she said softly. "Captain MacNelly sent me to you."

"But you shouldn't have come," replied Duane.

"As soon as he told me I would have come whether he wished it or not. You left me—all of us—stunned. I had no time to thank you. Oh, I do—with all my soul. It was noble of you. Father is overcome. He didn't expect so much. And he'll be true. But, Duane, I was told to hurry, and here I'm selfishly using time."

"Go, then—and leave me. You mustn't unnerve me now, when there's a desperate game to finish."

"Need it be desperate?" she whispered, coming close to him.

"Yes; it can't be else."

MacNelly had sent her to weaken him; of that Duane was sure. And he felt that she had wanted to come. Her eyes shed a light upon Duane he had never seen before.

"You're going to take some mad risk," she said. "Let me persuade you not to. You said—you cared for me—and I—oh, Duane—don't you—know—?" The low voice faltered and broke and failed.

Duane sustained a sudden shock and an instant of paralyzed confusion of thought.

She moved, she swept out her hands, and the wonder of her eyes dimmed in a flood of tears.

"My God! You can't care for me?" he cried hoarsely.

Then she met him, hands outstretched. "But I do—I do!"

Swift as light Duane caught her and held her to his breast. He stood holding her tight, with the feel of her warm, throbbing breast and the clasp of her arms as flesh-and-blood realities to fight a terrible fear. And he held her as if she had been his soul, his strength on earth, his hope of heaven, against his lips.

The strife of doubt all passed. He found his sight again. And there rushed over him a tide of emotion unutterably sweet and full, strong like an intoxicating wine, deep as his nature, something glorious and terrible as the blaze of the sun to one long in darkness. He had become an outcast, a wanderer, a gunman, a victim of circumstances; he had lost and suffered worse than death in that loss; he had gone down the endless bloody trail, a killer of men, a fugitive whose mind slowly and inevitably closed to all except the instinct to survive and a black despair; and now, with

this woman in his arms, her swelling breast against his, in this moment almost of resurrection, he bent under the storm of passion and joy possible only to him who had endured so much.

"Do you care—a little?" he whispered unsteadily. He bent over her, looking deep into the dark wet eyes.

She uttered a low laugh that was half sob, and her arms slipped up to his neck. "A little! Oh, Duane—Duane—a great deal!"

Their lips met in their first kiss. The sweetness, the fire of her mouth seemed so new, so strange, so irresistible to Duane. And he gave up to the enthralling moment. She met him halfway, returned kiss for kiss, clasp for clasp, her face scarlet, her eyes closed, till, her passion and strength spent, she fell back upon his shoulder.

Duane suddenly thought she was going to faint. He divined then that she had understood him, would have denied him nothing, not even her life, in that moment. But she was overcome, and he suffered a pang of regret at his unrestraint.

Presently she recovered, and she drew only the closer, and leaned upon him with her face upturned. He felt her hands on his, and they were soft, clinging, strong, like steel under velvet. He felt the rise and fall, the warmth of her breast. A tremor ran over him.

He tried to draw back, and if he succeeded a little her form swayed with him, pressing closer. She held her face up, and he was compelled to look. It was wonderful now: white, yet glowing, with the red lips parted, and dark eyes alluring.

"I love you, Duane!" she said. "For my sake don't go out to meet this outlaw face to face. It's something wild in you. Conquer it if you love me."

Duane became suddenly weak, and when he did take her into his arms again he scarcely had strength to lift her to a seat beside him. She seemed more than a dead weight.

Her calmness had fled. She was throbbing, palpitating, quivering, with hot wet cheeks and arms that clung to him like vines. She lifted her mouth to him, whispering, "Kiss me!"

Duane bent down, and her arms went round his neck and drew him close. With his lips on hers he seemed to float away. That kiss closed his eyes, and he could not lift his head. She kissed him—one long endless kiss—or else a thousand times. Her lips, her wet cheeks, her hair, the softness, the fragrance of her, the tender clasp of her arms, the swell of her breast—all these seemed to enclose him.

Duane could not put her from him. He yielded to her lips and arms, watching her, involuntarily returning her caresses, sure now of her intent, fascinated by the sweetness of her, bewildered, almost lost. This was what it was to be loved by a woman. His years of outlawry had blotted out any boyish love he might have known.

This was what he had to give up—all this wonder of her sweet person, this strange fire he feared yet loved, this mate his deep and tortured soul recognized. Never until that moment had he divined the meaning of a woman to a man. That meaning was physical inasmuch that he learned what beauty was, what marvel in the touch of quickening flesh; and it was spiritual in that he saw there might have been for him, under happier circumstances, a life of noble deeds lived for such a woman.

"Don't go! Don't go!" she cried as he started violently.

"I must. Dear, good-by. Remember I loved you!"

He pulled her hands loose from his, stepped back. "Ray, dearest—I believe—I'll come back!" he whispered.

These last words were falsehood.

He reached the door, gave her one last, piercing glance, to fix forever in memory that white face with its dark, staring, tragic eyes.

"Duane!"

He fled with that moan like death in his ears.

To forget her, to get back his nerve, he forced into mind the image of Poggin—Poggin, the tawny-haired, yellow-eyed, like a jaguar, with his rippling muscles. He brought back his sense of the outlaw's wonderful presence, his own unaccountable fear and hate.

Yes, Poggin had sent the cold sickness of fear to his marrow. Poggin was his supreme test. And this stupendous instinct, now deep as the very foundation of his life, demanded its wild and fatal issue. There was a horrible thrill in his sudden remembrance that Poggin likewise had been taunted in fear of him.

So the dark tide overwhelmed Duane, and when he left the room he was fierce, implacable, steeled to any outcome, quick like a panther, somber as death, in the thrall of his strange passion.

There was no excitement in the street. He crossed to the bank corner. A clock inside pointed to the hour of two. He went through the door into the vestibule, looked around, passed up the steps into the bank.

The clerks were at their desks, apparently busy. But they showed nervousness. The cashier paled at sight of

Duane. There were men—the rangers—crouching down behind the low partition. All the windows had been removed from the iron grating before the desks. The safe was closed. There was no money in sight. A customer came in, spoke to the cashier, and was told to come tomorrow.

Duane returned to the door. He could see far down the street, out into the country. There he waited, and minutes were eternities. He saw no person near him; he heard no sound.

At a few minutes before half past two a dark, compact body of horsemen appeared far down, turning into the road. They came at a sharp trot—a group that would have attracted attention anywhere at any time. They came a little faster as they entered town; then faster still; now they were four blocks away—now three—now two. Duane backed down the middle of the vestibule, up the steps, and halted in the center of the wide doorway.

There seemed to be a rushing in his ears through which pierced sharp, ringing *clip-clop* of iron hoofs. He could see only the corner of the street. But suddenly into that shot lean-limbed, dusty bay horses. There was a clattering of nervous hoofs pulled to a halt.

Duane saw the tawny Poggin speak to his companions. He dismounted quickly. They followed suit. They had the manner of ranchers about to conduct some business. No guns showed.

Poggin started leisurely for the bank door, quickening step a little. The others, close together, came behind him. Blossom Kane had a bag in his left hand. Jim Fletcher was left at the curb, and he had already gathered up the bridles.

Poggin entered the vestibule first,

with Kane on one side, Boldt on the other, a little in his rear. As he strode in he saw Duane.

"*Hell's Fire!*" he cried.

One instant Poggin looked up and Duane looked down.

Like a striking jaguar Poggin moved. Almost as quickly Duane threw his arm.

The guns boomed almost together.

Duane felt a blow just before he pulled trigger. His thoughts came fast, like the strange dots before his eyes. His rising gun had loosened in his hand. Poggin had drawn quicker!

A tearing agony encompassed his breast. He pulled—pulled—at random. Thunder of booming shots all about him! Red flashes, jets of smoke, shrill yells!

He was sinking. The end—yes, the end! With fading sight he saw Kane go down, then Boldt. But supreme torture, bitterer than death—Poggin stood, mane like a lion's, back to the wall, blood-faced, grand, with his guns spouting red!

All faded, darkened. The thunder deadened. Duane fell, seemed floating. There it drifted—Ray Longstreth's sweet face, white, with dark, tragic eyes, fading from his sight . . . fading . . . fading . . .

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Back to Life

LIGHT shown before Duane's eyes—thick, strange light that came and went. For a long time dull and booming sounds rushed by, filling all. It was a dream in which there was nothing; a drifting under

a burden; darkness, light, sound, movement; and vague, obscure sense of time—time that was very long. There was fire—creeping, consuming fire. A dark cloud of flame enveloped him, rolled him away.

He saw then, dimly, a room that was strange, strange people moving about over him, with faint voices, far away, things in a dream. He saw again, clearly, and consciousness returned, still unreal, still strange, full of those vague and faraway things. Then he was not dead. He lay stiff, like a stone, with a weight ponderous as a mountain upon him and all his bound body racked in slow, dull-beating agony.

A woman's face hovered over him, white and tragic-eyed, like one of his old haunting phantoms, yet sweet and eloquent. Then a man's face bent over him, looked deep into his eyes, and seemed to whisper from a distance: "Duane—Duane! Ah, he knew me!"

After that there was another long interval of darkness. When the light came again, clearer this time, the same earnest-faced man bent over him. It was MacNelly.

Duane tried to speak. His lips were weak, and he could scarcely move them.

"Poggin!" he whispered. His first real conscious thought was for Poggin.

"Poggin is dead, Duane; shot to pieces," replied MacNelly solemnly. "What a fight he made! He killed two of my men, wounded others. God! he was a tiger. He used up three guns before we downed him."

"Who—got—away?"

"Fletcher, the man with the horses. We downed all the others. Duane, the

job's done—it's done! Why, man, you're—"

"What of—of—her?"

"Miss Longstreth has been almost constantly at your bedside. And, Duane, the other night, when you sank low—so low—I think it was her spirit that held yours back. Oh, she's a wonderful girl. Duane, she never gave up, never lost her nerve for a moment. Well, we're going to take you home, and she'll go with us. Colonel Longstreth left for Louisiana right after the fight. I advised it. There was great excitement. It was best for him to leave."

"Have I—a—chance—to recover?"

"Chance? Why, man," exclaimed the captain, "you'll get well! You'll pack a sight of lead all your life. But you can stand that. Duane, the whole Southwest knows your story. You need never again be ashamed of the name Buck Duane. The brand of outlaw is washed out. Texas believes you've been a secret ranger all the time. You're a hero. And now think of home, your mother, of this noble girl—of your future."

The rangers took Duane home to Wellston.

A railroad had been built since Duane had gone into exile. Wellston had grown. A noisy crowd surrounded the station, but it stilled as Duane was carried from the train.

A sea of faces pressed close. Some were faces he remembered—schoolmates, friends, old neighbors. There was an upflinging of many hands. Duane was being welcomed home to the town from which he had fled.

A deadness within him broke. This welcome hurt him somehow, quickened him; and through his cold being, his weary

mind, passed a change. His sight dimmed.

Then there was a white house, his old home. How strange, yet how real! His heart beat fast. Had so many, many years passed? Familiar yet strange it was, and all seemed magnified.

They carried him in, these ranger comrades, and laid him down, and lifted his head upon pillows. The house was still, though full of people. Duane's gaze sought the open door.

Someone had entered—a tall girl in white, with dark, wet eyes and a light upon her face. She was leading an old lady, gray-haired, austere-faced, somber and sad. His mother! She was feeble, but she walked erect. She was pale, shaking, yet maintained her dignity.

The someone in white uttered a low cry and knelt by Duane's bed. His mother flung wide her arms with a strange gesture.

"This man! They've not brought back my boy. This man's his father! Where is my son? My son—oh, my son!"

When Duane grew stronger it was a pleasure to lie by the west window and watch Uncle Jim whittle his stick and listen to his talk. The old man was broken now. He told many interesting things about people Duane had known—people who had grown up and married, failed, succeeded, gone away, and died. But it was hard to keep Uncle Jim off the subject of guns, outlaws, fights.

Uncle Jim was childish now, and he had a great pride in his nephew. He wanted to hear of all of Duane's exile. And if there was one thing more than another that pleased him it was to talk about the bullets which Duane carried in his body.

"Five bullets, ain't it?" he asked for the hundredth time. "Five in that last scrap! By gum! And you had six before?"

"Yes, Uncle," replied Duane.

"Five and six. That makes eleven. By gum! A man's a man, to carry all that lead. But, Buck, you could carry more. There's that nigger Edwards, right here in Wellston. He's got a ton of bullets in him. Doesn't seem to mind them none. And there's Cole Miller. I've seen him. Been a bad man in his day. They say he packs twenty-three bullets. But he's bigger than you—got more flesh.

"Funny, wasn't it, Buck, about the doctor only bein' able to cut one bullet out of you—that one in your breastbone? It was a forty-one caliber, an unusual cartridge. I saw it, and I wanted it, but Miss Longstreth wouldn't part with it. Buck, there was a bullet left in one of Poggin's guns, and that bullet was the same kind as the one cut out of you. By gum! Boy, it'd have killed you if it'd stayed there."

"It would indeed, Uncle," replied Duane, and the old, haunting, somber mood returned.

But Duane was not often at the mercy of childish old hero-worshiping Uncle Jim. Miss Longstreth was the only person who seemed to divine Duane's gloomy mood, and when she was with him she warded off all suggestion.

One afternoon, while she was there at the west window, a message came for him. They read it together:

You have saved the ranger service to the Lone Star State—MacNelly.

Ray knelt beside him at the window, and he believed she meant to speak then of the thing they had shunned. Her face

was still white, but sweeter now, warm with rich life beneath the marble; and her dark eyes were still intent, still haunted by shadows, but no longer tragic.

"I'm glad for MacNelly's sake as well as the state's," said Duane.

She made no reply to that and seemed to be thinking deeply. Duane shrank a little.

"The pain—is it any worse today?" she asked instantly.

"No; it's the same. It will always be the same. I'm full of lead, you know. But I don't mind a little pain."

"Then—it's the old mood—the fear?" she whispered. "Tell me."

"Yes. It haunts me. I'll be well soon—able to go out. Then that—that hell will come back!"

"No, no!" she said with emotion.

"Some drunken cowboy, some fool with a gun, will hunt me out in every town, wherever I go," he went on, miserably. "Buck Duane! To kill Buck Duane!"

"Hush! Don't speak so. Listen. You remember that day in Val Verde, when I came to you—pleaded with you not to meet Poggin? Oh, that was a terrible hour for me. But it showed me the truth. I saw the struggle between your passion to kill and your love for me. I could have saved you then had I known what I know now. Now I understand that—that thing which haunts you. But you'll never have to draw again. You'll never have to kill another man, thank God!"

Like a drowning man he would have grasped at straws, but he could not voice his passionate query.

She put tender arms round his neck. "Because you'll have me with you always," she replied. "Because always

I shall be between you and that—that terrible thing."

It seemed with the spoken thought absolute assurance of her power came to her. Duane realized instantly that he was in the arms of a stronger woman than she who had pled with him that fatal day.

"We'll—we'll be married and leave Texas," she said softly, with the red blood rising rich and dark in her cheeks.

"Ray!"

"Yes we will, though you're laggard in asking me, sir."

"But, dear—suppose," he replied huskily, "suppose there might be—be children—a boy. A boy with his father's blood!"

"I pray God there will be. I do not fear what you fear. But even so—he'll be half my blood."

Duane felt the storm rise and break in him. The shining glory of love in this woman's eyes made him weak as a child. How could she love him—how could she so bravely face a future with him? Yet she held him in her arms, twining her hands round his neck, and pressing close to him. Her faith and love and beauty—these she meant to throw between him and all that terrible past. They were her power, and she meant to use them all. He dared not think of accepting her sacrifice.

"But Ray—you dear, noble girl—I'm poor. I have nothing. And I'm a cripple."

"Oh, you'll be well some day," she replied. "And listen—I have money. My mother left me well off. All she had was her father's—Do you understand? We'll take Uncle Jim and your mother. We'll go to Louisiana—to my

old home. It's far from here. There's a plantation to work. There are horses and cattle—a great cypress forest to cut. Oh, you'll have much to do. You'll forget there. You'll learn to love my home. It's a beautiful old place. There are groves where the gray moss blows all day and the nightingales sing all night."

"My darling!" cried Duane brokenly. "No, no, no!" Yet he knew in his heart that he was yielding to her, that he could not resist her a moment longer.

"We'll be happy," she whispered. "Oh, I know. Come!—come!—come!"

Her eyes were closing, heavy-lidded, and she lifted sweet, tremulous, waiting lips.

With bursting heart Duane bent to them. Then he held her, close pressed to him, while with dim eyes he looked

out over the line of low hills in the west, down where the sun was setting gold and red, down over the Nueces and the wild brakes of the Rio Grande which he was never to see again.

It was in this solemn and exalted moment that Duane accepted happiness and faced new life, trusting this brave and tender woman to be stronger than the dark and fateful passion that had shadowed his past.

It would come back—that wind of flame, that madness to forget, that driving, relentless instinct for blood. It would come back with those pale, drifting, haunting faces and the accusing, fading eyes, but all his life, always between them and him, rendering them powerless, would be the faith and love and beauty of this noble women.

THE END

COW CAMP LINGO

A Quiz

AROUND a cow camp you'd be likely at one time or another to hear all these terms used to designate different individuals on the range. How many of the terms listed in the left-hand column can you match correctly with the definitions given in the right-hand column?

A score of 6 right is passing; 7, fair; 8, good; 9, excellent; and 10 right marks you as a top hand yourself! Answers on page 96.

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| 1. Sweater | —Extra hand taken on at roundup time |
| 2. Night-hawk | —The cook |
| 3. Lent | —Cowboy who patrols range boundary |
| 4. Line rider | —Meddler; a fellow too interested in someone else's business |
| 5. Hood | —Nighttime horse wrangler |
| 6. Iron-man | —A green hand |
| 7. Eyeballer | —Outsider hanging around for a free meal |
| 8. Miss Sally | —Driver of the hoodlum wagon |
| 9. Rep | —Hand who keeps branding irons hot |
| 10. Waddy | —Hand who goes to other rancher's roundups to recover such of his employer's cattle as have wandered from their home range |

"End of the Line, Jack Hardin!"

Story by
CARL SMITH

Pictures by
DAN MULLER

JOHN WESLEY HARDIN, whose record makes those of our contemporary gangsters look a little pale, already has 35 notches on his gun when he crosses the path of Ranger John Armstrong. That, however, doesn't seem to bother Lieutenant Armstrong much, as the reader will discover for himself. Perhaps, though, it's just as well that John Wesley isn't wearing a holster on this hot August day . . .



On a hot August day in 1877 a bronzed, bearded man waited for the afternoon train to pull into the little station outside Pensacola, Florida. Interested idlers noted that he had a look of the open range in spite of his eastern "city clothes." The bearded stranger looked closely at the cars slowing to a stop. He spoke a few quick words to four men who moved toward him and then limped briskly toward the only coach.



In the coach aboard which the stranger swung sat John Wesley Hardin, his elbow resting on the sill of the open window next to him. At the age of 27 Hardin had become the country's most notorious killer, with the blood of 35 victims on his hands. The man who walked down the aisle toward him was a Texas Ranger.



Hardin, a native Texan, had ranged over the Southwest, killing in cold blood. Both Texas and Louisiana had set a price on his head, the rewards totaling \$4,000. Hardin's murder of a man named Webb, a deputy sheriff of Comanche County, Texas, had put the Rangers on his trail.



Ranger Lieutenant John Armstrong, the bearded stranger, had picked up the killer's trail earlier in the summer. He was aided by John Duncan, who rented a farm near one owned by Hardin's father and got to know him. Finding that young Hardin owned some of the equipment, Duncan asked Hardin Senior about buying it.



When the father wrote to Hardin for permission to sell, Duncan saw him address the envelope to *John Swain, Whitney, Alabama*. Armstrong and Duncan found railroad officials in the Alabama town anxious to help them, for "John Swain" headed a gang of train robbers. Armstrong learned that Hardin had gone to Pensacola.



So it was that they had run Hardin down in the Florida town. Armstrong instructed Duncan to seize Hardin's arm through the open window. Local officers assisting them were supposed to enter the rear of the coach. The Ranger advanced boldly down the aisle, shifted his cane to his left hand, and drew a .44 Colt's.



Armstrong's gun identified him as surely as a Ranger uniform would have. The huge six-shooter with the seven-inch barrel must have spelled out *Texas* in capital letters to Hardin. "Texas, by God!" he exclaimed, and went for his guns as Armstrong snapped: "End of the line for you, Jack Hardin!"



Four of Hardin's gang were in the coach with him. As Hardin tugged desperately at the gun in his waistband, one of his companions drew a six-shooter, fired, and blew the hat off Armstrong's head. The Ranger shot him through the heart. Hardin still struggled with his own gun, which was tangled in his suspenders.



The local police, who were supposed to come up from the rear, somehow failed to get there. Armstrong saw that his only chance was to close with the killer. He hurled his cane at a desperado drawing a gun, threw himself on Hardin, and grabbed for the outlaw's gun as Hardin launched a kick at him.



The killer jammed his boots in Armstrong's belly and catapulted him into the empty seat across the aisle. The Ranger bounced off the springs as if he were a rubber ball, and in a split-second reaction as he flew through the air he clubbed his .44 and swung it at Hardin's head.



Stunned, Hardin slumped back into his seat. Armstrong landed, catlike, astride him, his big .44 covering Hardin's cronies, who had been unable to shoot for fear of hitting their leader. The one-man whirlwind from Texas was too much for them. They dropped their weapons meekly and surrendered.



But with Hardin unconscious, one of his men dead, and the others surrendered, Armstrong's troubles seemed to be just beginning. He did not have warrants for any of them. So he gave the conductor orders to get the train moving, and then he kicked Hardin's surviving cronies off, one after the other.



When Armstrong and Hardin arrived in Whitney, Hardin's gang gathered in a mob to free the prisoner. "First I'll shoot Hardin through the head," said the Ranger, "then I'll start killing you—and I'll keep on killing you as long as I have ammunition." The gang milled around grumbling until a special coach arrived.



This took the two to the Montgomery jail, where a lawyer appeared, demanding that Hardin be released, since Armstrong still lacked a warrant. Talking fast, the Ranger obtained a delay, and was prevailing on the governor of Alabama to consent to rendition when the warrants came by special courier. Armstrong went to Hardin's cell.



"John Wesley Hardin," the Ranger intoned, "by virtue of the authority . . ." When he finished, Hardin said craftily, "That warrant's no good—it's for Hardin; I'm John Swain." Armstrong replied, "Glad to hear you admit it." And taking another warrant from his pocket, he read: "John Swain, by virtue of the authority . . ."



Armstrong told friends later that Hardin cursed him all the way from Montgomery to Texas. Although first-degree murder could not be proved against Hardin, a Comanche County jury found him guilty of homicide, and he got a 25-year sentence. He behaved himself, studied law, and won parole after serving more than 15 years, getting a full pardon shortly thereafter. He began practicing law and tried to settle down, but his belligerence soon got him into trouble again. Less than two years after his release from the penitentiary, he was shot to death in an El Paso saloon.

A Friend of Buck Hollister

*By William
MacLeod Raine*



CURTIS COLE stepped out of the back door of the Jenkins & Dunn saloon into the darkness of the soft velvet night. A few stars pricked the sky but there was no moon. He stood motionless in the deep shadow of the entrance, his keen gaze searching the store fronts and the alleys for any lurking gunman who might be waiting to pump lead at him. Vigilance was for him the price of life, and he was a careful man who took no unnecessary chances.

The saloon was at the corner of Spring and Main streets. At this exact spot in the center of Tascosa began the long dusty cattle trail to Dodge City. Diagonally across the road from him was the Exchange Hotel. The passage of this intersection was for Cole a nightly dread. It was the best chance of the day for an assassin to get at him.

His eyes probed the darkness for any black bulk not identified, for any movement in the silent night. He held to his

place as patiently as a cat at a mouse hole, no stir in his crouched frame except for the black eyes that shuttled back and forth. The fingers of his right hand encircled the butt of a .45 resting in a holster from which the lower end had been cut to allow firing the weapon without drawing it. That gun had blown the life out of eight men—three of them since he had been marshal of Tascosa.

When at last he moved it was so lightly that there was no rumor of footsteps as he edged forward close to the wall. At the corner his glance swept up and down Spring Street before he left the shadow of the adobe building to cross to the hotel.

He was a man of six feet two, magnificently built, with a face coldly handsome and impassive. From his broad shoulders smooth muscles rippled down and when in action glided with the rhythm of finely meshed machinery. As he stepped to the sidewalk in front

CURTIS COLE, marshal of Tascosa, is a careful man who takes no unnecessary chances, even though his shooting is amazingly swift and accurate. He is also a cold and ruthless killer, whose gun is available for hire. But as the menacing shadow of his .45 falls across the path of Buck Hollister's nephew, a stranger rides into Tascosa—a downy-faced youth who fails to show the proper respect for Marshal Cole's gun reputation. This story, by the dean of Western writers, now appears in print for the first time.



of the hotel he saw that there was nobody in the lobby except Russell, the proprietor, and a loose-limbed, gangling boy in the clothes of a cowpuncher. Opening the door, he walked in, with the poised arrogance in his bearing that made him so impressive. Nobody seeing him now could have guessed how fear had tightened his stomach muscles during that 30-yard journey from the saloon to the hotel, nor why his apparently careless saunter took him to a spot which could not be seen from outside.

Cole's glance swept over the pimply-faced youngster with the slack jaw and dismissed him from mind as negligible. He walked softly down the corridor to his room and whipped open the door suddenly. A lighted lamp was on the table and the window blind was down. He had arranged with Russell to see that both

these details were taken care of each night before his return. He did not want to meet a gun blast from a dark room when he showed in the doorway.

The cowboy lounging in a chair with a dusty down-at-the-heel boot resting on the seat of another chair watched the marshal disappear, a strange glitter in his pale blue eyes. "I reckon that is the great Curtis Cole," he jeered.

Russell, a heavy-set, bald-headed man with a beard, was a good citizen who minded his own business and got along with all factions in the district. "You're a stranger, son," he mentioned, "so I'll tell you it isn't safe to get funny about our marshal."

"Got you all buffaloed, has he?"

"I'm not expressing any opinion," the hotel keeper replied after a pause, his voice low and earnest. "I'll just

state a fact. Curt Cole is a gunfighter from the chunk. He is chain lightning on the draw and he can hit a lark on the wing."

"Larks don't pack sixshooters," the boy retorted. "The way I heard it Mr. Cole does his best shootin' from the brush when the other guy isn't expectin' it."

"Son, you're too big for yore boots," Russell reproved. "You're lucky nobody has heard this silly talk except me. There are fellows in this town would carry it to Cole if they heard you shoot off yore mouth."

"I wear man-size boots," the cowboy replied. "What has this fellow Cole got that scares you-all? I've been told Tascosa is a tough town."

Russell looked straight at the young braggart, a worried frown on his grave face. "For God's sake, padlock yore mouth, boy, if you don't want to head straight for Boot Hill to lie beside three other fellows Cole put there. He's no man to make loose talk about."

"Sure enough, he throws a big shadow in this town," the youngster sneered. "But I reckon maybe it can be cut down to normal. My daddy onct told me all men were the same size back of a Colt's."

"I don't want to listen to any more of that kind of talk," Russell told him severely. "If you live two-three more years—which I doubt—you'll learn enough sense not to throw around dynamite that's liable to blow you to kingdom come."

The hotel keeper rose from his seat, went back to the desk, and began to read the *Tascosa Pioneer*. There was no good in warning any more this youngster who had signed himself *Bob Smith, Dodge City, Kansas*, on the register. He was hell-bent on committing suicide.

Bob Smith got up laughing, danced a step or two of a jig, and clumped to the door on his disreputable high-heeled boots. "I reckon I'll go see the elephant," he said.

After locking the door of his bedroom and making sure that the blind left no opening for a peeping eye, Curtis Cole removed coat and vest and examined himself in the looking-glass. He saw eyes black as those of a snake in a face grim and immobile. When he smiled, as he rarely did, it was from the lips only. In the past dozen years he had never been seen to laugh. Part of his stock in trade was this pose of superman with no kindly human weaknesses. When he rubbed out a man for pay it was his custom to strike from ambush. If he killed in the open he either set the scene to give him an advantage or made sure the victim was not dangerous. For half an hour every day he practiced shooting at a mark in a swale back of the town. He could fling bullets with amazing swiftness and accuracy. In his business it paid to be a living legend.

Now before the glass he spent fifteen minutes working for speed and smoothness in making the draw. The twentieth part of a second might some day mark the difference between life and death.

He had agreed to kill a young fellow tomorrow, a lad by the name of Jim Hollister. It would be an easy job. Jim had inherited a small ranch on the Canadian from an uncle who had been shot down recently as he came out in the morning from his cabin to get a bucket of water. Jim was a tenderfoot, brought up in Cleveland, Ohio. One of the big spreads had tried to buy

his set-up for a fraction of its value, but the newcomer had proved unexpectedly stubborn and refused to sell.

Cole hoped that he could get his man on the range from ambush with a rifle as he was coming to town to sign some legal papers. If he failed to do that Cole would have to pick a quarrel with him in Tascosa and stop his clock. That would not be so good, since it would tie him to the shooting.

He knew there were murmured criticisms of his record—that he was too free with a gun, that he took a sadistic pleasure in killing. Many resented the murder of old Buck Hollister, and friends of Ben Tolt had not liked the circumstances attendant on Tolt's death. Ben had been very drunk at the time, and it was claimed the marshal had egged on his hostility to give him an excuse for using a gun. It was time, Cole thought, to close the Tascosa chapter of his life. He would move to another live town—say Trinidad, Colorado. But first he had to collect the \$500 for the job he must do tomorrow.

The marshal's preparations for sleep were unusual, though they were an every-night routine with him. He carried his cot to the outside wall of the room so that a blind shot through the window could not possibly hit him, and he crumpled newspapers on the floor in front of the door and beneath the window. He was a very light sleeper. The rustle of paper would awaken him instantly.

Up early the next morning, he shaved and dressed carefully. His suits were the most expensive he could buy, his boots custom-made, and his ruffled shirts perfectly laundered. These details were inherently of the Cole tradition that set him apart from other men, helped to

make him a marked character on the rough and slovenly frontier.

Though the food at the Exchange Hotel was good, Cole never ate there. At the long table in the center of the dining-room he could not forestall an attack from behind. He walked along the creek up Water Street to the Canton Restaurant, swept the room with a swift glance as he entered, and took a seat at the small table always reserved for him in a rear corner. He sat back to the wall where he could see anybody who came in from the front or from the kitchen.

Wong brought him a cup of coffee and took his order for eggs, ham, and a stack of flapjacks. A big, tanned man in corduroys and scuffed boots came in from the street and took the table next to the marshal, not removing from his head the low-crowned black hat he wore.

"Mornin', Cole," he said curtly, and told Wong what he wanted for breakfast. Not until two men at another table had departed did he speak again to his neighbor at the next table. They were alone in the restaurant.

"Hollister won't start for town until about ten o'clock," he murmured out of the corner of his mouth. "He has some calf branding to do in the corral."

"Sure he'll come in today?" Cole asked, his voice muted.

"Or tomorrow. Time will be up for filing the papers."

"Will he be alone?"

"Don't know. If it isn't safe to get him beat it back to town. We'll hold him till you come with some play about fixing up a deal for his place."

Wong shuffled in with a tray of food and Chris Manners gave his attention

to eating. He was manager and part owner of the K M outfit.

Cole finished first. As he was leaving, Manners grunted a gruff "Good luck."

The marshal walked down Main Street to the Cattleman's Corral and ordered his sorrel gelding saddled. He was the only man in town who did not saddle his own horse. If it had not been for his reputation as a killer, Tom Moore, the owner of the wagon yard, would have told him to do it himself.

Curt Cole explained the rifle he was carrying. "I'll not be back before noon. Going to get some quail up the creek."

"There are quite a few above the bend," Tom suggested.

"Three or four will be all I want," Cole answered. "Enough for my dinner—I'm tired of Wong's tough steaks and fat pork."

He had luck and flushed several coveys. Within half an hour three quail were tied to his saddle horn. At a muddy spot on the edge of the creek he took pains to leave clear boot tracks that could later be identified as his if necessary.

The sorrel was a good traveler, fast and with plenty of stamina. Since time might be an important element Cole held his mount to a rapid pace as he swung back in a wide half circle over the undulating plain. Wherever it was possible, he followed arroyos and draws to avoid being seen.

Once he saw a prairie schooner's dust moving slowly westward. Now that the Panhandle was on the boom, that was a common sight. Movers were coming in every day to settle in this country of fine grass and open range, to the great annoyance of the big cattle ranches which had usurped vast tracts for their stock. Already there was almost

open war between these nesters and the large outfits, for even a fool could see that the cattle empires of such spreads as the X I T, the L S, and the K M could not long exist if the creeks were going to be homesteaded by the little fellows.

He passed villages of prairie dogs which at his approach became ghost towns as the inhabitants dived into their holes. In the distance antelopes flashed their tails as they moved through the brush. Shadows from delicate clouds drifted across the prairie floor whose mottled carpet of brown, gray, and green stretched to the far horizon and there blended with the blue. None of the loveliness of the desert was apparent to Cole. He was intent on destruction.

Around the shoulder of a bench he rode into a deep dry wash which angled toward a road and came within two-hundred yards of it before changing its mind and sweeping to the right. Back of a clump of mesquite Cole tied the sorrel. Rifle in hand, he went warily along the edge of the bed, avoiding the telltale sand and stepping on the hard squares of adobe near the bank. He found an ideal spot for ambush behind some clumps of bunch grass, the bank just high enough to give him a steady rest for the rifle barrel.

He had not long to wait, but the first sounds told him he was due for a disappointment. More than one horse was traveling the road toward him. Jim Hollister was flanked by two other riders, Dave Shores and Ed Doan. Dave worked for Jim; the other was a neighboring homesteader. It might be they were with Hollister by mere chance, or they might be standing by until he had signed the papers.

Cole retraced his way to town and came in along the creek down Water Street and along Main to the corral. He turned over his mount to Tom Moore and left his rifle at the corral. There would be no need for it now.

The boy with the retreating chin who called himself Bob Smith had slept the deep, peaceful sleep of the innocent. He ate breakfast with gusto at the Exchange. In the course of the meal he raised a casual question about the marshal.

The coffee-brown youth beside him, wearing a calfskin vest and scarlet bandanna, stopped shoveling hash-brown potatoes into his facial cavern long enough to answer. "Mr. Cole's a night owl. He don't git up till noon."

A store clerk across the table volunteered further information: "Anyways he don't eat here, but at the Canton."

Mrs. Russell, just back from the kitchen with a plate of hot biscuits, mentioned that he had risen early to go shooting quail.

The stranger showed his buck teeth in a grin. "That will be nice and safe for him," he drawled. "Quail cain't shoot back."

This observation brought startling results. Mrs. Russell almost dropped the plate. The coffee-brown cowboy stopped shoveling food, fork poised in the air. His jaw hanging, the store clerk stared at Smith. The hum of conversation died for a few moments until the hostess pushed the biscuits at the fool boy making trouble for himself.

"Have another biscuit," she urged hastily. "Eat hearty. Plenty more in the kitchen."

Bob Smith smiled gratefully at her. "Y'betcha!" he said, then helped himself to two, buttered them, and poured sorghum from a pitcher into his plate, blandly unconscious of having lighted a giant firecracker that might blow him up. Between bites he placidly set a match to another. "Tascosa is all right," he added. "Not every town can brag of having an A-One bad man like Cole struttin' its streets."

Mrs. Russell delivered an ultimatum. "Young man, that will be enough from you," she told him severely. "Eat yore rations and quit talking."

"Yes, ma'am," he said in a chastened voice, but with a reckless imp of deviltry dancing in his eyes. "Shall I take my plate and eat in a corner?"

When he had finished breakfast, Mrs. Russell drew him to one side. "If you have a lick of sense you'll saddle yore bronc and get out of town before Mr. Cole comes back. Someone is going to tell him what you said."

"You've got me plumb scared, ma'am," he replied. "Would he jump a boy like me?"

"If I was you I wouldn't stand there snickerin' about it. I'd be sure enough scared. Only a half-wit acts like you do, throwin' a big front so everyone will think you tough. I'm warning you. Leave Tascosa quick—or you'll end in a coffin."

"Much obliged, ma'am." He gave her again his facile, friendly smile. "I'll certainly think it over."

From the window she watched him walking up Main Street, his big floppy hat tilted jauntily to one side of his head. It was tragic to be young, she thought. These youngsters dancing on the quicksands of time refused to learn

anything except from their own experience, and often before they acquired wisdom it was too late. For this boy the clock of eternity was ticking away his last hours, but he was so cocksure of himself he did not even guess it.

As usual at this hour, Tascosa was drowsy and peaceful as old age. The sun beat down pleasantly on adobe buildings showing no activity. A cowboy lay in front of Mickey McCormick's livery stable sleeping off the effects of a hectic night. The Negro swamper was sweeping cards and cigar stubs out of the Cattle Exchange saloon. At the creek a Mexican girl was washing clothes. Otherwise the street appeared to be deserted.

Bob Smith sauntered to the Cattle-men's Corral to see that his horse had been fed. From Moore he gathered that the marshal had ridden up Tascosa Creek and did not expect to be back till noon. The stranger sat on a wagon tongue and chatted with Tom for a time.

The owner of the corral was guarded in his talk, but he admitted that the tension between the big outfits and the small settlers in the Panhandle was increasing. There was a good deal of rustling. One cowboy had started with a yoke of oxen two years before and now had a hundred calves carrying his brand. Barbed wire had reached Texas and the large ranches were fencing hundreds of miles of open range.

Presently Smith strolled back to the business section of the town and came to rest on a chair in front of the Exchange Hotel. He was in no hurry. He sat tip-tilted against the wall, the worn heel of a boot hooked in a rung of the chair. His long, lean body was slack, the muscles

relaxed, but the cool eyes of the boy swept the dusty road with indolent vigilance. He was as nearly motionless as one could be who rolled, lit, and smoked a cigarette every few minutes.

He saw the life of the town begin to quicken. Now and again a cowboy's pony stirred the dust of the street as it trotted along Main, and its owner dismounted, tied, and bowlegged into a saloon. Women with shopping-baskets disappeared into stores. A barefooted boy ambled past, a flop-eared hound at his heels. Moore jiggled up the road and tied Smith's pony at the hitchrack in front of the hotel.

Three men rode up Rinehart Street and at the corner of Main were hailed by two others whose costumes marked them as ranchmen.

"Like to see you a minute, Jim," the larger of the two called out pleasantly. "Got a proposition to make."

The horsemen consulted together for a few moments, after which two of them turned down Main. The third joined the two on foot. He tied in front of the Jim East saloon and walked into it with them.

One of the chair loungers in front of the hotel said to a fat man sitting next to him, "That's funny—when did Chris Manners start hobnobbing with Jim Hollister?"

"Must be about that homestead claim beside his uncle's ranch Jim has to prove up on," the fat man wheezed. "The two places will take quite a bite out of the K M range."

"And Chris wouldn't like that. Sure, he wants to dicker with Jim."

"The kid acts real stubborn." The fat man lowered his voice. "If I was

him I'd pull in my horns. Chris ain't a patient man."

The young stranger lowered the front legs of his chair, rose, and stretched. "Reckon I'll go get me a mornin' bracer," he announced. Deserting his place, he went up the street and turned in at Jim East's saloon. What he had heard on the porch interested him. It tied up with the business that had brought him to Tascosa. Old Buck Hollister had been the first wagon boss for whom he had ridden. That had been on a spread in Lincoln County, New Mexico. The rough old-timer had been kind to him.

Toward night the shuffle of many feet would be heard in the place, but as yet except for the bartender nobody was here but a man playing solitaire near the rear and the three sitting at a table in the alcove. The boy who had registered at the hotel as from Dodge City moved to the end of the bar and ordered a drink. He stood sideways, a foot on the rail, in such a position that he could observe the trio in the adjoining room.

They had beer in front of them, and only the murmur of their low voices reached Smith. But he could see that the older men were urging something on Hollister which he was rejecting.

The man in the white apron polished the top of the bar. "First visit here?" he asked casually.

"First visit," the boy agreed. "Who is the gent with the white hat?" He asked the question gently in a low voice.

"Bar Kennedy. With the K M. Foreman." The bartender added, "Taking a look-see at the Panhandle?"

"That's right." The customer sam-

pled his glass absently but did not drink it.

"New settlers comin' in every day. Two railroads will be here inside of a year, maybe three. Finest climate in the world. Plenty of grass and water. Tascosa is bound to be the biggest city between Denver and Fort Worth."

"Might be. Or just a wide place in the road. You never can tell. It's sure got one good booster." The stranger observed that the conference in the alcove was going to break up soon. It was not going too well. Manners pushed back his chair and rose.

"We've made you a fair offer, Hollister," he said harshly, no longer in a persuasive whisper. "Take it or leave it."

"You would have a nice stake for a start somewhere else, Jim," Kennedy told the homesteader, still with smooth false friendliness.

Hollister was a heavily built young man with the stubborn face of one who could not easily be moved from a position he had taken. His dress and appearance announced him a tenderfoot.

"I don't think it is a fair offer, and anyhow I don't want to sell," he answered doggedly. "You got no right to crowd me. The law says—"

"Damn the law," interrupted Manners. "A lot of fat politicians who never saw a longhorn sit on their behinds in Washington and give away the range we fought the Comanches for to a lot of hungry movers that don't know what to do with the land when they've got it. We've got a priority right to that grass, and by God we're going to keep it."

The voices of both men had risen sharply, the pretense of friendly bargaining pushed aside.

"Don't get on the peck, Chris," the third man at the table said, with a warning look at Manners. "Of course we aim to obey the law. But you got to remember, Hollister, that this is a cattle country. A stampede of covered wagons, each one with a plow in it, is going to play hell with the range. All we ask is for you to be reasonable."

"And get off the earth," flung out the homesteader. "What you want is for a dozen big ranches to occupy the whole Panhandle. It won't be that way."

"He's got hell in the neck, Bar," Manners said curtly. "I'm through with him." He stalked out of the alcove into the main room.

Bar Kennedy did not follow him at once. He was a man who liked to keep his lawlessness under cover. It was a pity Curt Cole had slipped up on his job and let Hollister reach town, for open violence was likely to bring reprisals. In a low tone, without any threats but rather in the manner of an older man giving advice to a hot-headed youngster, he implored Hollister not to be rash. This country was full of outlaws working for the large outfits. With no orders from the boss some one of them was likely to cut loose at any time. It was plumb foolish for a nice young fellow like Hollister to run the risk of meeting the fate his uncle had. Why swim against a tide too strong for him?

Hollister was worried but still obstinate. "You can't scare me," he said, his shrill voice betraying him. "I'm standing on my rights. Right now I'm going to the land registrar's office."

"It's a mistake, Jim," Kennedy urged. "Why choose the hard way when there is a nice easy one open for you?"

"I've got a good ranch and a fine

homestead claim beside it," Hollister retorted. "I'm gonna stay right there."

"All right—if you've made up yore mind," Kennedy offered his hand. "No hard feelings. Come to the bar and have a drink with us to show it's all right."

Hollister hesitated, but he was relieved to have Kennedy take it so well. He bellied up to the bar with the two K M men. A pimply-faced boy was standing there but none of them paid any attention to him.

Care had ridden the shoulders of Curtis Cole all the way back to town. It was still heavy on them as he walked up Main. He did not like the job he had contracted to do. No fear of Jim Hollister bothered him. The tenderfoot did not have a chance when the guns flashed. What disturbed him was the temper of the town, the resentment of the men who had let him get away with his killings because of the marshal's star he wore. Manners would pay him the five hundred, but if a storm broke he would not lift a hand to protect his gunman. Cole had a feeling of impending disaster. He wished he could back out, but he had gone too far. In spite of the warm weather his hands and feet felt chill.

This killing must be made to look plausible. He had to provoke or frighten the tenderfoot into reaching for his gun before he made a move, and he must at the same time make it appear that he was the aggrieved party being crowded.

Hollister was at the bar with Manners and Kennedy when Cole entered Jim East's place. Standing at the far end was the same boy with the retreating chin he had seen at the hotel last

night. A moment later Dave Shores came in the side door. He worked for Hollister, but Cole did not think he would fight for his employer. A man without loyalty, Manners had used him to keep informed of Hollister's moves.

Kennedy nodded a greeting to the marshal, glanced at the quail, and said, "Been huntin', I see, Curt."

Through the swing doors bowlegged a K M rider. "Judge Horn wants to see you and Bar at the court house about the location of the south line fence," he said to Manners. "He's waitin' for you now."

The buck teeth of Bob Smith showed in a thin ironic smile. This was perfect timing, if his guess was correct about what was scheduled to occur. Cole was to carry on and make sure Hollister never reached the land registrar.

Jim Hollister turned to follow the cattlemen out of the room but the marshal barred the way. "Want to see you a minute, Jim," he said.

Anger flared up in Hollister. Nobody had seen this man kill his uncle, but bits of circumstantial evidence had cropped up that indicated his guilt. "I've got nothing to say to you, sir," the homesteader answered.

"Suits me. Say it to the judge and jury. I'm arrestin' you for the murder of Buck Hollister."

The shock of the man's words showed in the face of the tenderfoot. This was another move in the campaign to rob him of his rights. If he was flung into jail he could not prove up on his claim.

"It's a trick," he cried. "You know I had nothing to do with it."

"You killed him for his ranch and cattle."

The black eyes of the marshal glit-

tered, in them a cold and deadly menace. It came to Hollister with appalling certainty that he was not going to be arrested. He was going to be murdered. Invisible fingers clawed his stomach muscles into a tight, icy lump. Tiny beads of sweat broke out on his forehead. But he could not crawl. He had to face up to what was coming.

"That's a lie," he cried, "You murdered him yourself for money."

"You heard him, all of you," Cole said savagely. "I won't take that from any man alive. Reach for yore gun, Hollister."

"Just a moment," a cool voice interrupted. "I'm declaring myself in, Cole—with a priority claim."

The marshal's startled gaze turned on the face and figure of the youth who confronted him. The body of the boy who called himself Bob Smith had lost its slackness and the face its weak amiability. He was smiling, but there was nothing of friendliness in that mocking grin.

From the back of the room the solitary player broke his silence. "God, it's Billy the Kid," he exclaimed.

A cold wind blew through Cole. All morning he had been oppressed by a premonition that fate was closing in on him. He was sure of it now. Back of his flaccid muscles there was no will to fight. All the dangerous front he had built up so carefully to impress others was swept away.

"I—I've never hurt you," he quavered. "We've never even met before."

"We're meeting now," the Kid said grimly. "Listen, Cole. A fourteen-year-old kid started to ride for the J J outfit in New Mexico. He was a skinny little cuss, easy game for one big bully riding

for the ranch. The wagon boss of the J J was Buck Hollister. One night the bully picked on the little guy and when he fought back beat the stuffing outa him. Before he had quite finished Buck walked in. Does that ring a bell in you, Mr. Cole? Buck took that bully apart with his fists and kicked him out of the bunk house. The fellow hit the trail that night."

"I was kinda wild in those days," Cole pleaded. "I been sorry about the way I treated the kid. I'll do anything you say to—"

The quiet voice cut into his protestations. "The kid swore he would get even some day. This is it. Get wild again, Cole. Draw yore cutter and turn loose yore wolf."

Cole knew he was lost. His cold fingers reached for the butt of the .45. The blast of the two revolvers sounded almost as one, and before the sound had died one of them roared again. Cole's weapon dropped from his slack fingers. His big body teetered and crashed against the bar, and from there to the floor. It lay there, one hand twitching for a moment. Then it was still.

Then trickles of smoke were still rising from the gun barrels when the slap of running feet outside sounded. Men burst through the swing doors. The first two were Manners and Kennedy. They stared at the body, astounded at what they saw.

Gun in hand, the boy backed to the side door, his movements quick as a cat. "If anyone wants to make anything of this, now's the time," he snapped.

"I don't understand this," Manners said sharply. "What happened?"

"Yore killer made a gun play and got his. Listen, Manners—Buck Hollister was a friend of mine. So I stopped his murderer's clock. And get this—if anything happens to his nephew I'll be back sure as you are a foot high. So long, gents."

He slammed the door behind him and raced for the horse tied at the hitchrack in front of the hotel. Pulling the slip knot, he vaulted to the saddle and jumped the pony to a gallop. Before the revolvers began popping at him he was out of range.

Answer to "Cow Camp Lingo" Quiz on Page 76

1. Sweater—an outsider who hangs around for a free meal. 2. Night-hawk—a night-time horse wrangler. 3. Lent—a green hand. 4. Line rider—a cowboy who patrols the range boundary. 5. Hood—the driver of the "hoodlum wagon" (slang for bed-wagon). 6. Iron-man—a hand who keeps the branding irons hot. 7. Eyeballer—meddler; a fellow too interested in someone else's business. 8. Miss Sally—the cook. 9. Rep—hand assigned by his employer to another spread's roundup, whose job it is to recover cows and calves of his own brand which have wandered off their own range (often called a "stray man"). 10. Waddy—an extra hand taken on at roundup time (original meaning, although it is now often used loosely to indicate any cowboy).



"Purt Near"

By S. Omar Barker

THEY called him "Purt Near Perkins," for unless the booger lied,
He'd purt near done most everything that he had ever tried.
He'd purt near been a preacher an' he'd purt near roped a bear;
He'd met up with Comanches once an' purt near lost his hair.
He'd purt near wed an heiress who had money by the keg,
He'd purt near had the measles, an' he'd purt near broke his leg.
He'd purt near been a trail boss, an' accordin' to his claim,
He'd purt near shot Bill Hickok—which had purt near won him fame!
He'd purt near rode some broncs upon which no one else had stuck—
In fact he was the feller who had purt near drowned the duck!
Now mostly all the cowboys on the Lazy S B spread,
They took his talkin' with a grin an' let him fight his head.
But one named Tom Maginnis sorter told it to him rough:
"You're ridin' with an outfit now where 'purt near' ain't enough!
We tie our lass ropes to the horn, an' what we ketch we hold,
An' 'purt near' is one alibi we never do unfold!
In fact, right now I'll tell you that no word I ever hear
Sounds quite so plain damn useless as that little pair, 'purt near'!"
That's how ol' Tom Maginnis laid it out upon the line,
An' like a heap of preaching' talk, it sounded mighty fine.
But one day Tom Maginnis, while a-riding' off alone,
He lamed his horse an' had to ketch some hostile nester's roan
To ride back to the ranch on. But somewheres along the way
A bunch of nesters held him up, an' there was hell to pay!
Tom claimed he hadn't stole the horse—just borrowed it to ride
Them nesters hated cowboys, an' they told him that he lied.
They cussed him for a horsethief, claimed they'd caught him with the goods,
An' they set right out to hang him in a near-by patch of woods.
They had pore Tom surrounded, with their guns all fixed to shoot;
It looked like this pore cowboy sure had heard his last owl hoot!
They tied a rope around his neck an' throwed it o'er a limb,
An' Tom Maginnis purt near knowed this was the last of him.
Then suddenly a shot rang out from somewhere up the hill!
Them nesters dropped the rope an' ran, like nesters sometimes will
When bullets start to whizzin'. Tom's heart lept up with hope
To see ol' Purt Near Perkins ridin' toward him at a lope.
"Looks like I purt near got here just in time," ol' Perkins said,
"To see them nesters hang you!" Tom's face got kinder red.
"You purt near did!" He purt near grinned. "They purt near had me strung!"
You're lookin' at a cowboy that has purt near just been hung!
An' also one that's changed his mind—for no word ever said,
Can sound as sweet as 'purt near,' when a man's been purt near dead!"

A "Paintin' Pistoleer" Yarn



THE TOWN of Apache is thrown into one of its frequent turmoils when Sheriff Rimfire Cudd is tempted to stray from the path of single blessedness by an alluring "Lonesome Hearts" ad in the *Cattleman's Journal*. It takes some quick thinking—and some fancy shooting—by Justin O. Smith, famed "Paintin' Pistoleer," to restore calm to Apache and to rescue the lawman from the results of his Indian-summer impulse. This story has not been published before.

Object Matri-Money

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

YOU'D think a jasper in Sheriff Rimfire Cudd's shoes would let well enough alone, after reveling in the blessings of bachelorhood for sixty-odd years like he has. Nobody in Apache enjoyed more of life's pleasures or had less to offer a bride.

Rimfire had a rent-free shanty behind the jailhouse to live in, the county furnished him a fair-to-middlin' saddle horse and all the ca'tridges he needed, and his credit was good for a beer at the Bloated Goat Saloon any time.

But in spite of all this bounty from Lady Luck, old Rimfire had to up and swallow the bait he seen in the *Cattleman's Journal* about this here "Lonesome Hearts Club," which outfit rustles up wives for unsuspecting single men, and dabs a wide loop on husbands for old maids and grass widders.

Rimfire must have felt a mite sheepish about the deal, at that, because the old fool never let on to nobody about it except this young artist feller name of Justin Other Smith, better known hereabouts as the Paintin' Pistoleer on account of his being the champeen pistol shot of the Territory.

Anyhow, Justin O. was busy daubing away at a canvas in his studio upstairs over the Longhorn Saddle Shop one day, working on a pitcher of Custer's Last Stand for a cowboy bootery up in Denver that aimed to use the pitcher

on its next year's catalogue, when who should come clambering up the stairs, blowin' like a fish, but Sheriff Rimfire Cudd. He brung with him a tore-up copy of the *Cattleman's Journal* he had found out behind the Feedbag Café.

"Smith," Rimfire wheezes after he's ketched his breath, "I want you to sketch a pitcher of me to send to my future bride."

The Paintin' Pistoleer lays down his brushes and comes over close to take a sniff of the sheriff's breath, nacherly figgering Cudd had hoisted one too many over at Curly Bill Grane's Bar.

"Bride?" Justin O. guffaws, thinking Rimfire is joshin' him. "What she-male would take a moth-eaten old galoot like you?"

Which same made Rimfire bristle up. He shows the Paintin' Pistoleer this here Lonesome Hearts Club advertisement in the magazine, which listed a batch of would-be brides all the same as a stock breeder announcing an auction sale.

"I picked this one and writ her a letter," the sheriff brags, pointing to a paragraph he had ringed with a soft-nose .45 bullet. "She sounds like a fittin' companion to share my sunset years."

Right then Justin O. Smith realizes Cudd ain't joshing, and what was worse, the old rapscaillon had gone in too far

to back out. Smith reads the description of Rimfire's choice:

Wealthy Socialite, 35, blonde, statuesque beauty, cultured Boston background, college degree, excellent cook, seamstress. Desires correspondence with Western gentleman of similar station. Object: matrimony. Address (Miss) Bedelia O'Tooligan, Box F, care of Cattleman's Journal.

"Great day in the mornin'!" Smith manages to blurt out. "No Beacon Street beauty would think of moving sight unseen out to an uncurried neck of nowhere like Apache, Arizona, to marry you, Sheriff—not even if your nose was full of nickels!"

Cudd preens his tobacco-stained handlebar mustaches and dances a little buck-and-wing jig, which shows what love can do to an old codger who is usually so stove up with rheumatiz that he has trouble h'isting a laig to reach the stirrup.

"Is tha-a-t so!" Rimfire snorts, giving his galluses a snap. "Well, I writ her, offerin' my hand in holy matrimony. She ain't exactly ascepted my bait, but she's nibblin' powerful hard. I got her letter here somewheres to prove same."

Sure enough, Rimfire produces a perty purple-colored envelope which has a Boston postmark, and it smells sweet as a bull-tongue cactus after a spring rain. The address is writ in a neat feminine hand, with lots of fancy curly-cues:

*Sheriff Rimfire Cudd, Esquire,
Suite 3, Calle La Boose Arms,
Apache, Arizona T.*

"Callaboose Arms!" Smith howls. "Suite 3! That's a newfangled way of describin' a leaky-roofed lean-to behind the county jail, danged if it ain't."

Cudd rolls his eyes like a sick calf

and teeters up and down on his cowboots, grinning like his throat's cut from ear to ear. "All's fair in love an' war," the sheriff smirks. "I told her I owned a gold mine, too. Go ahead an' read what Bedelia has got to say."

The Paintin' Pistoleer gives Rimfire a sidewise look like he figgers the sheriff's been eating loco weed, and unfolds the letter. A tintype falls out, and when Smith sees the girl's face he lets out a whistle you could have heard plumb across the border.

This Bedelia O'Tooligan is a lulu, all right, with a fancy head of blond curls that reminds Smith of the can-can girls at the Birdcage Theater in Tombstone. She's got big blue eyes, shiny as the seat of a drummer's pants, and sassy little rosebud lips, and a button nose that any artist would say belonged on a statoo of a Greek goddess.

"You sure picked a gorgeous filly," Smith has to admit. "Let's see what she's got to say:

"Dearly beloved Rimmy-Cuddles," Smith reads out loud, and has to wait a minute till he gets over a choking spell. "Your epistle of the 10th inst. convinces me that at last I have found my bold Lochinvar from out of the West. I am sure you are a Lochinvar when you tell me you own a dashing white steed that you will carry me away on to the love-nest you have built for us out where your gold mine is."

That's too much for Justin O. to swallow without chawing. "'Dashing white steed!'" he groans. "You ain't by any chance referrin' to that spring-halted bone bag you been ridin' lately, are you? And this love-nest wouldn't be spelled boar's nest, would it? Last time I was inside your shack—"

Rimfire Cudd can stand a hoorawin' as good as the next man, but he shows signs of getting boogered. "You know how women are with the mushy talk," he blushes. "Go on. Read the next page."

Smith fans the perfume out of his nose and finishes reading Bedelia's tender message: "*I enclose a picture of myself. It doesn't do me justice, but I am sure you are not wooing me for my beauty, Rimmy darling, any more than you are attracted by my personal fortune. It goes without saying that you being the owner of an Arizona gold mine is a mere bagatelle to me—*"

"It may be a mere bag o' shells to Bedelia," the sheriff cuts in, "but it was a whoppin' big lie to me—yak! Yak!"

"Shut up," growls Smith, and goes on reading: "*As an evidence of your good faith, Rimmy-Cuddles, would you please send me by return mail a recent photograph of your dear face, and a certified check in the amount of \$200? This is the train fare from Boston to Arizona, and I ask you for it only because it would not be seemly for a maiden of my refinement to pay her own way.—Eagerly and devotedly your own loving Bedelia (O'Tooligan).*"

Justin Other Smith hands the sheriff back his letter, and scratches his head, trying to figure out a gentle way to bust the idea that has occurred to him.

"I'll be glad to sketch a portrait of you, Sheriff," he says, "because that won't cost you anything. But don't be a danged fool and mail her one penny of dinero. If Bedelia's wealthy, she won't need it. If she ain't got the price of train fare West, then she is a

fraud and a swindle, and you don't want to tangle with her."

Well, they augered back and forth for quite a spell, and finally the Paintin' Pistoleer give in. He had this rush job to do on the catalogue cover, and it was obvious that Rimfire Cudd had made up his mind, such as it was. So Justin O. has the sheriff hunker down on a box by the window, and picks up a pencil and a pad of paper, and in less time than it takes to tell it, he had drawn a spittin' image of Rimfire and handed it over.

The sheriff looks at it, and his Adam's apple bounces up and down like a rubber ball. It's as natural-looking as his reflection in the back-bar mirror over at the Bloated Goat, no denying that. Smith hadn't flattered him none, and he hadn't detracted from Rimfire's masculine qualities, neither.

But like Smith said later, Michelangelo hisself couldn't have done much to glamorize Rimfire's big nose, which looks like the muzzle of a sawed-off shotgun at best, or his noggin, which is as bald as a bedpost and twice as shiny. He was practically a gummer, that is to say he only had two teeth that met, and his eyes bugged out like a tromped-on toad-frawg's. Rimfire's ears looked like leather flaps on a suitcase and his neck resembled a bar rag that had been twisted around a mopstick.

Well, Rimfire folds up the picture, and mumbles his thank-yous, but Justin O. ignores all that, having turned back to his easel to make up for lost time. After all, if Rimfire wanted to throw zoo bucks down a rathole, at his age, that was his business.

The sheriff knowed what would happen to his budding romance if Bedelia O'Tooligan saw this monstrosity Smith had

drawed. Cudd looks around the studio, and his eyes light on a little postcard-sized portrait that the Paintin' Pistooleer had turned out in color for Lew Pirtle, who runs the Overland Telegraph.

This here pitcher made Lew look like one of them handsome sports you see in the flannel-drawers pages of the mail-order catalogues, his hair all spruced up slick-like, his mustache trimmed just so, and his neck fixed up fancy with a celluloid buckwing collar and a string cravat. Lew Pirtle aimed to give this pitcher to his missus on the tenth wedding anniversary they had coming up, as a surprise, and hadn't gotten around to calling for it yet.

Well, Rimfire Cudd slips Lew's painting under his vest on his way out, without the Paintin' Pistooleer being none the wiser. He sneaks over to the jail and wraps it up, along with \$200 in greenbacks he had scraped up from friends around town, a little here and a little there. The upshot of it was that the next outgoing mail stage carries a package addressed to Miss Bedelia O'Tooligan in Boston, Mass., and Rimfire settles back to await developments.

Lew Pirtle was fit to be tied when his wedding anniversary rolled around two weeks later, and Justin O' Smith had to confess that he had mislaid the portrait he had fixed up for the missus. Missus Pirtle must have taken it perty bad, not getting a present from her old man, because Lew showed up at the Bloated Goat that evening with a mouse on one eye, and swigged rotgut until around midnight, when Missus Pirtle and the nine little Pirtles come by and dragged Lew out by the ear.

Justin O' Smith happened to be in the Bloated Goat one afternoon about

a week after that, having his usual glass of buttermilk while he played chess with Sol Fishman, who runs the O.K. Mercantile, when the batwings slam open and Lew Pirtle comes bustin' in, all het up the way he gets when a telegram comes in addressed to Apache station, which ain't often.

"Where's Rimfire Cudd?" Lew bel-lers, looking around the barroom. "I got a telly-grum here from the future Missus Cudd!"

Well, it so happens that Rimfire ain't in the saloon, being busy in his lean-to behind the jailhouse, papering his bedroom with colored pages he's tore out of mail-order catalogues. Nobody knew why the sheriff was busting out with this rash of fol-de-rol in this boar's nest he batches in, excepting Justin O. Smith, who by this time has figured that the sheriff has heard the last of Bedelia O'Tooligan and his \$200.

But it seems that the Paintin' Pistooleer had been a mite harsh in his judgment of the young lady from Boston. Lew Pirtle could hardly wait to spring the news, although he got real huffy when Curly Bill Grane, the bartender, wanted to open the telegram.

"That ain't ethical!" Pirtle says, shocked. "This message is for the sheriff an' nobody else. Besides, it come collect."

Curly Bill had his swamper light a shuck out to fetch back the sheriff, and in the meantime Lew wet his whistle a couple of times with the Bloated Goat's forty-rod special. This likker has a habit of loosening a man's tongue, so Justin O' Smith and the others knew what was in Rimfire's telegram before the sheriff had a chance to get back.

"Rimmy-Cuddles," Pirtle quotes the message he had taken off the wire,

"your pitcher has won my heart completely. Your princess will arrive in Apache on July tenth, in a gilded chariot drawn by six white chargers. Forever your adoring Bedelia."

About that time the sheriff shows up, pop-eyed with curiosity. The Paintin' Pistooleer loans him a saw-buck to pay for the message, and Rimfire goes over to a corner and makes a big mystery out of reading what it says. He comes back to the bar pretending that the telegram come from the Texas Rangers, warning him to be on the watch for a desperado who's heading west, armed to the teeth.

"Aw, come off, Sheriff!" says Lew Pirtle, who by now is so drunk his back teeth is floating. "We're all your friends. If you're expecting your sweetheart to show up on the tenth—hell's fire, man, that's tomorrow! And there ain't even a minister o' the gospel in town to tie the knot!"

Well, that let the polecat out of the bag, but Rimfire was game. He set up the house to free beers, and shows off Bedelia's tintype. He brags about how good she can cook, and how he already had a new stove coming C.O.D. from the mail-order house as a wedding gift for his bride, and he goes so far as to offer Bedelia's services in sewing on buttons or darning socks for any of the poor single men around town.

The Paintin' Pistooleer was the only hombre in the saloon who was cool-headed enough to figger out that Bedelia's golden chariot drawn by six white chargers was nothing more or less than tomorrow's regular weekly Wells-Fargo stagecoach from Tombstone.

Missus Jim Groot, the banker's wife, gets wind of the news and sends an urgent telegram calling the circuit rider

over from Bisbee, and she gets the Apache Ladies' Knitting & Peach Preserve Society busy dolling up the lodge hall with sage blossoms and ocotillo wands and mesquite brush, making a wedding bower.

Justin Other Smith, still unable to figger out how a queen like Bedelia could bring herself to marry a repulsive old nincompoop like Rimfire, joins in the spirit of the thing and volunteers to paint a wedding portrait of the happy couple.

Sol Fishman decked out the sheriff in new overhalls and star boots and a new Stetson, and the livery stable chipped in a buggy and a team to take the newlyweds over to Tombstone for their honeymoon.

The July tenth stage was due at Wells-Fargo Express at noon. By 11.30 everybody in Apache had turned out to greet the bride from Boston. Cowboys from outlying spreads, and jackleg muckers from the Sacatone diggings, and a batch of Cheery-cow Injun bucks and their squaws, all dolled up in their Sunday feather bonnets and brightest blankets, was jammed around the stagecoach depot.

Well, the stage showed up on time for once, and it was kilted over at an angle like it had a big load of passengers aboard. The sheriff was waiting, his mustache washed and waxed and his stubble shaved off for the first time in five years, and his tin star shined up like the Arizona sun. He was as proud an' happy as if he had laid an egg single-handed.

Lew Pirtle, who was sort of acting as Rimfire's best man for the coming nuptials, was on hand in his Prince Albert to open the door of the Concord before it rattled to a halt.

Well, it turned out there was only

one passenger, and it was a lady on the far side of forty who must have weighed in the neighborhood of 300 pounds. The Concord tilted over on its thoroughbraces as this lady steps out, almost spilling the driver off the boot when it rocked back to a level keel.

Rimfire Cudd's face fell down to his belt buckle when he seen that Bedelia O'Tooligan must have missed connections back along the line. This passenger couldn't be the girl of the tintype. Her head was a bloated sausage set on a stack of double chins, and her hair straggled out from under her hat like stuffing from a busted sofa, and what appeared at first glance to be an oversized bustle—well, turned out it wasn't a bustle after all.

Well, this elephant in the pink dress hides her face coy-like behind a fan, and looks around at the crowd. The stage team let out a snort of relief, like they'd pulled a load of ore down from the mines and was glad the haul was finished.

Lew Pirtle was poking his head through the window of the coach, looking for another passenger who would fit Bedelia's description, when this walking lard barrel caught sight of him.

"Rimmy-Cuddles, precious!" she squeals like a shoat caught in a rail fence. "Come to your little Bedelia, my beloved! You look exactly like your picture—I'd have known you anywheres!"

Lew Pirtle jumped like a hornet had stung him under his tail coat, but he was too late. Bedelia reached out a pair of hands that looked like inflated rubber gloves and caught Lew in a bear-hug, kissing him with a big flabby mouth that Lew said later felt

like a leppie-calf slobbering in a milk bucket.

Everybody was so busy watching Pirtle struggling with that silk-skirted octopus that they didn't see Rimfire Cudd sneaking out for parts unknown. The sheriff's face looked as green as it did the time he found the dead mouse in his beer.

By the time Bedelia let Lew go, the best man looked like he'd come off second best in an augerment with a buzz saw. Before he could say anything, though, Missus Lew Pirtle storms up like a stampeding brimmer bull with blood in its eye.

Missus Pirtle hauled off and bopped Bedelia in the face with the bouquet she had aimed to give the bride-to-be on behalf of the Ladies' Knitting & Peach Preserve Society. Bedelia lost her balance and sat down with a thump in the open door of the stage coach, and like to capsized it off'n the running gear.

"Floozy! Husband-stealer! Home-wrecker!" squalls Missus Pirtle, and then she turned toward Lew and give him a backhanded slap that knocked his store teeth gally-west and sent poor Lew tail-over-tincup.

Missus Pirtle followed up, hauled her husband off'n the adobe by both ears, and the next thing Lew had ducked behind the stage and was lighting out for his Overland Telegraph office, with his Missus and her nine kids strung out behind him like the tail of a kite.

Well, Bedelia O'Tooligan picked herself up, clawed rose petals and baby-breath ferns out of her chins, and glares around for somebody to light in on. The Injun bucks give out with a war whoop and busted into full retreat when

they seen the Boston lady sizing them up.

Nobody in Apache would have tackled Bedelia with a 20-foot horse whip just then, but Justin Other Smith, who smelled a rat the size of Adam's off ox by this time, remembering the pitcher of Lew Pirtle that had disappeared from his studio, comes out of the crowd and doffed his hat.

"Madam, you made a slight mistake, is all," the Paintin' Pistoleer says in that courteous Alabama drawl of his. "I can explain everything. The gentleman you thought was your intended groom was, in reality, the best man."

Bedelia was puffing like a cow bogged down in a mudhole, but Justin Other Smith was a handsome young sport who had a way with women, and his big grin cooled her off pronto.

"Sheriff Rimfire Cudd is the man you're looking for, and he's twice as handsome as Lew Pirtle," Justin O. prevaricates, figgering that the sheriff had buttered his bed and be danged if he oughtn't to lie in it. "Right now your intended groom is out in the desert tracking down a bandit by the name of Two-Gun Timothy, the Terror of the Territory. Rimfire will be back, draggin' his prisoner behind him—you can depend on that."

Well, Bedelia just cooed like a mud hen in a hog-waller when she heard the reason why her beloved wasn't on hand to greet her. "If you will be so kind as to pay the stage driver ten dollars and thirty cents," she gurgled, "I will go to a hotel and tidy up after my journey. I wish to look as charming as possible when my Lochinvar returns."

Justin O. wasn't one to turn down

a lady in distress, so he takes out his poke and pays off the Wells-Fargo jehu. By this time the good ladies of the Knitting Society have taken the bride in tow, and hustled her off to Jim Groot's home.

The Paintin' Pistoleer was as busy as a cat on a tin roof after that. He sashayed over to the jailhouse and found evidence to prove that Rimfire Cudd had high-tailed in a big hurry, leaving only a note for somebody to cancel his order for the cookstove. His horse was missing from the county stables, but Justin O. had a perty good idea where the bridegroom had vamoosed to.

Smith rounded up Sol Fishman and the other boys at the Bloated Goat, and swore 'em to secrecy, and they had a powwow. Then he tossed a kack on Skeeter, his palomino, and lit out of town in the direction of the Sacatoness and the Mexican border.

Sure enough, he located Rimfire Cudd hiding out at his brother's soddy in a sheep camp over in the foothills. Rimfire allowed he would bed down there for the night, and then he was heading for the Mexican border and didn't intend to come back to Apache, ever.

"That overstuffed witch tricked me," Rimfire groaned. "That photygraph must have been tookeen around 1492 B.C. I woulda jailed her on a fragrancancy charge, only I knew corralin' her would be worth more than my life."

The Paintin' Pistoleer whips out his .32 Colt on a .45 frame, the gun he had made famous throughout Arizona Territory for his trick target-shootin'. "Runnin' out ain't the honorable thing to do, Sheriff," the Pistoleer says, sounding disappointed. "You're takin' a *pasear*

back to Apache and do right by your Bedelia. She come all the way out from Boston to marry her Lochinvar, and she ain't going to be jilted—not so long as there is a spark of chivalry in the wild and woolly West. Where's your sense of honor, Rimfire?"

The sheriff looks at the cocked smoke-pole in Smith's hand, and unbuttons his shirt to bare his skinny chest. "Go ahead and shoot, cuss you!" he begs. "I wouldn't hitch up with that over-grown hippopotamus ifn she was worth her weight in gold dust. Which would amount to a right considerable sum."

Justin O. clicks his gunhammer to show he means business. "Rattle your hocks, Sheriff," he says. "The weddin' is scheduled for eight o'clock an' you're goin' to be there."

Well, it was getting along toward dusk when Sheriff Rimfire Cudd rode back into Apache. He was towing a masked man who was handcuffed and had a lass'-rope around his neck.

Bedelia O'Tooligan was trying on her bridal gown in Mrs. Jim Groot's parlor when the sheriff rode past, and the ladies heard somebody holler that the sheriff had dabbed his twine on Two-Gun Timothy, the Terror of the Territory.

That did it. Bedelia lets out a whoop and goes lumbering at a gallop over to the jail, her veil blowin' in the breeze like a loose shirt tail, in time to see her hero get offn his dirty-white steed and march his prisoner into the calaboose.

"Two-Gun Timothy, yore days as the Terror of the Territory are over!" Rimfire hollers, after he claps his prisoner into a cell. "I'll delay yore hangin' just long enough to get myself married to the

pertiest gal who ever drawed a breath."

Rimfire comes out of the jail and meets Bedelia face to face. She looks sort of stunned for a second, remembering what Justin O. Smith had said about his good looks, but she was dead game. The next thing Rimfire knowed she was hugging him fit to bend every rib in his body and wetting him down good with kisses.

"My adorable he-man!" she cooed. "Will it make any difference to you if I confess something naughty?" she says, fluttering her eyelashes.

Rimfire was too tuckered to say a word just then.

"I'm bankrupt, Rimmy-Cuddles!" she whimpers tearfully. "My fortune was in mining stock, and just before I left Boston I found out my mines had petered out and left me a pauper. Does that make any difference in our love, my Rimmykins?"

It must not have, because the word got out that the sky pilot from Tombstone would perform the nuptial rites over in the lodge hall prompt at eight o'clock, and the horse and buggy was all slicked up outside, waiting to take Mr. and Mrs. Cudd on their honeymoon trip.

The lodge hall was packed by seven o'clock, with Injun bucks off the Cheery-cow reservation dangling from the rafters and peerin' in the winders. Rimfire Cudd, dolled up in the new overalls Sol Fishman had donated, was waiting with the preacher. He looked more like a cheap job of embalming than he did a happy groom-to-be, though.

Jim Groot, the banker, and Lew Pirdle, the latter pretty well skinned up, were posted in the background with their six-guns ready, just to make

sure Rimfire didn't try stampeding at the first minute.

Prompt at eight o'clock Missus Pirtle thumped out the wedding march from Low & Grin on a piano they had brought over from the Busted Flush Dance Hall for the occasion, and everybody stood up when Bedelia O'Tooligan waddled into the hall on the arm of Sol Fishman.

Sol had to drop behind, though, the aisle not being wide enough for both him and a bride of Bedelia's dimensions, but in due time the sky pilot was reading the marriage ceremony, using one arm to help hold up the sheriff, who was already depending on his Bedelia for support.

"Do you, Bedelia Penelope O'Tooligan, take this man to be your lawful wedded spouse?" the sky pilot wants to know, shutting his eyes and shuddering.

"If I don't I'll have had a long trip for nothin'," Bedelia titters, beaming down at the sheriff. "You bet I do, Reverend."

The preacher gulped and turned to Rimfire. "And do you, Rimfire Cadwallader Cudd, take this woman—"

Just then the glass window behind the rose bower smashes open and a masked man in batwing chaps and a ten-gallon sombrero straddles over the sill, brandishing two six-guns.

"Two-Gun Timothy!" bellers Rimfire Cudd, coming to life. "The Terror of the Territory has busted jail—and I ain't heeled!"

The preacher keeled over in a dead faint at Bedelia's feet.

"You're spendin' your honeymoon in Hades, Sheriff!" yells Two-Gun Timothy. "I'll give you five ticks to say yore prayers!"

And then the masked bandick cuts loose with a dazzlin' display of fancy shootin' that told everybody in the lodge hall except Bedelia O'Tooligan that it was the Paintin' Pistoleer masqueradin' behind that git-up. Nobody in the world except Justin Other Smith could have shot up the place as expertly as this "Two-Gun Timothy" did then.

His left-hand gun shot a vase of flowers offn the piano. His right-hand gun knocked feathers off an Injun buck's bonnet up in the rafters. He kept shooting, fast as firecrackers popping off—windowlights, wall pictures, a couple of lamps. And then he turns his smoking guns on Rimfire Cudd, who was braced for the shock like the hero he was.

"I got one slug left in each gun," Two-Gun Timothy snarled, "and they got yore name writ on 'em, Sheriff!"

Bedelia let out a scream as she seen the masked man shoot point-blank at her prospective groom, and Rimfire Cudd toppled over to the floor like a coat spilling off a coat.

That was enough for Bedelia O'Tooligan. She lit out for the side door. It was latched, but that didn't mean a thing for her 300-odd pounds. She crashed outdoors in a shower of kindlin' wood.

The Paintin' Pistoleer sprinted outdoors after her, sheddin' his mask and his guns on the way. He caught up with Bedelia out at the fence. She was squalling like a baby, and for a minute Justin O. feels guilty for the trick he'd pulled off, until he found out what she was crying about.

"If that blankety-blank outlaw had waited one more minute," she cusses like a muleskinner, "I would have been Rimfire's legal widow and could have

settled up his estate for my poor, dead lover!"

Justin O. Smith hands her a one-way stage ticket to Tombstone, her not stopping to wonder how come he had it so pat-handly. "It so happens that the stage you came in on hasn't left town yet, on account of the driver staying around to see Rimfire get married off," the Paintin' Pistoleer says sympathetic-like. "You just got time to make it, unless—unless you want to stick around for poor old Rimfire's funeral. The least you can do for the poor dead boy is take care of his burial expenses."

But Bedelia O'Tooligan left on the Concord, wedding gown and all. It seems she hated funerals, preferring to remember the late lamented sheriff as he had looked in life—a dashing Lochinvar on a handsome white steed.

So Apache's loss was Boston's gain, and the boys adjourned to the Bloated

Goat. Rimfire Cudd got his chance to strut and be the toast of the town after all, thanks to the two blank ca'tridges which the Paintin' Pistoleer had "shot" him with in the lodge hall.

It was such a gala occasion, this celebration of the sheriff's narrow escape from a fate worse than death, that the Paintin' Pistoleer consented to down a shot of Blue Bagpipe whisky when Curly Bill Grane got around to setting up the house in Rimfire's honor.

Funny thing, but Curly Bill was the only man in the house who wasn't grinning fit to split. Bartenders ain't supposed to go on crying jags during business hours, but Curly Bill was mighty close onto it.

"I can't get that Bedelia out of my mind," he blubbers. "She looked so sweet an' innocent an' perty standin' there in front of the altar. Say, Rimfire—you still got her Boston address, ain't you?"

FRONTIER WARFARE IN THE MODERN MANNER

AN AMPHIBIOUS ASSAULT in the best modern manner provided an unusual feature in the Bannock War in 1878. The Bannocks, hotly pursued by U. S. troops, were attempting to cross the Columbia River into Oregon territory when the action occurred. An alert officer commandeered three river steamers and equipped them with howitzers and Gatling guns from the Fourth Artillery. When the Indians were sighted at a ford, the vessels bore down on the spot, spitting lead. After the barrage, troops were landed and the operation was brought to a successful close with the capture of large numbers of hostiles, together with ponies and supplies.

—BOB BEAUGRAND

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Dear Sirs,—About two months ago I sent for an APAL, I found it truly remarkable, I gave up smoking without any discomfort and a longing for a smoke. I am truly grateful.
Mrs. M.C., Kent

Dear Sirs,—It is now almost twelve months since I got an APAL, although I was a chain smoker until the APAL arrived. I have not had the slightest inclination to take up smoking since I got my APAL.
Mrs. E.K., Dublin

Dear Sirs,—Some little time ago I sent for three APALS, for my wife, daughter and self. I was not very popular for doing this, however, since they arrived between us we have saved over £7 on cigarettes. We have completely conquered the cigarette habit. Had this state of affairs been prophesied a month ago I would never have believed it.
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M.W., Harrogate

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E.E., Ammanford

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L.H., Pewlands Gill

Dear Sirs,—After some delay I wish to report on the success of my APAL. I received it on the 28th February at 03.00 hours and replaced it for a cigarette, and I am happy to say that I have not smoked since. I was a heavy smoker for 10 years.
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HEALTH CULTURE ASSOCIATION

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A True Tale of the Old West



For Scalps: Pesos

By W. H. HUTCHINSON

THE MEXICAN GOVERNMENT, searching desperately for a way to curb the raiding forays of Apache, Yaqui, and Comanche tribesmen, once authorized the payment of bounties for the scalps of their aggressive red-skinned enemies. Although failing to accomplish its purpose, the step did give rise to the swift growth of a group of men little known in U. S. history—the Hair Hunters of the Old Southwest. This article was written especially for ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE.

THE Spanish legacy to the Southwest is rich in deed, thought, and word. The deeds and the thoughts are hard to trace these days, but the words are easy to find and easier to use. They belong to the country. One word, used and passed down by the *Conquistadores*, is their word for enemy. That word is *Apache*!

This word, shortened by the fron-

tiersmen, trappers, cowboys, and settlers to 'Pache, and preceded by a string of descriptive and unprintable adjectives, carried the chill breath of fear to the Southwest for 350 years—from the earliest Spanish explorations until Geronimo was clapped into confinement in Fort Pickens in 1886. That is a long time—and many scalps.

The Spaniard fought the 'Pache early

and kept on fighting him with little success until the Texans and Americans pushed our western frontiers into *Apache-ria* with the barrels of their long rifles. The process of civilizing the "lesser breeds outside the law" languished until Judge Colt began his immortal process of equalization. Even with the Judge's help, it was twenty years after Appomattox Courthouse before the Apache—The Enemy—was brought to heel; cooped on reservation land that no white man wanted; robbed of his fierce freedom and his penchant for inflicting slow and painful death. Many an Apache, man, woman, and child, paid the price of incessant warfare in the settlement of the great Southwest. Some were killed for fun, some for necessity, and some for the bounty on their hair, or ears—as the contract stipulated.

The Spanish archives of Northern Mexico, which then included Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, contain an incredible record of Indian terror during the five-year period from 1771 to 1776:

"[the Indian raids] resulted in the slaughter of 1764 persons, NOT COUNTING soldiers, travellers or captives, while vast districts were laid desolate."

The pattern thus revealed was carried over into the 19th century, unabated save for brief periods when the government was able to buy peace with their adversaries—their enemy, the Apache. Is it any wonder that the hidalgos on their great *haciendas*, the peons in their adobe *casitas*, offered up prayers for deliverance from this scourge from the north that swept down at will, plundering, looting, raping, and killing—carrying all before it?

In the early 1830s the raids became so frequent and terrible, and the government so powerless to stop them, that drastic steps were taken. These steps were duly formalized in a series of documents called the *Proyectos de Guerra* (Plans for War). The Indians were better armed and better supplied than ever before. The Mexicans swore they were swapping the loot of Mexico for the goods of the American traders, for powder, ball and long rifles, for knives and the hoop-iron that made arrow and lance points. There is historical basis for believing that the Mexicans were right.

The Comanche, those incomparable horsemen, entered into the sport with a vengeance about 1835. There is little doubt that the peace treaties signed with them in this year by the United States were responsible for their activity. The United States Commissioners who negotiated these treaties could smell the coming war with Mexico as well as the next man. That they could also smell the profit to be gained from trade with these hardy warriors is not unbelievable. From their lodges of painted buffalo hides on the banks of the Arkansas and Canadian Rivers, the Comanche swept down across the Staked Plains and into Mexico. When they returned, they drove great herds of stolen horses and weeping files of captive women and children, and scalps fluttered dryly from their lance points.

The Yaqui, too, from their strongholds in the Sierra Madre, gave the country no rest. Comanche, Yaqui, Apache—these three, but the most dangerous, the most cruel and persistent, was The Enemy, the Apache.

The *Proyectos de Guerra* had one purpose only—the extermination of *los*

Indios broncos, and to this end they provided a bounty scale for scalps: \$100 for the scalp of a warrior; \$50 for the scalp of a squaw; \$25 for the scalp of a child. The scalps had to be delivered to the capitals of either Chihuahua or Sonora, and payment was made as the trophies were flung down on the floor for tally—payment in silver pesos, freshly minted. The scalps then furnished decorations for the outer walls and balconies of the governor's palace.

Armijo, sometime governor of New Mexico, paid his bounties on ears and nailed them up around the palace walls in Santa Fé to indicate that he kept the country pacified. The scalp bounty must have seemed like a good idea to the harassed Mexicans. It must have seemed good, too, to that group of men unparalleled in our history, the scalp-hunters of the South-west, for the scalp-hunters were Americans or Texans, the two names being distinct even then.

The Apache had not paid much attention to the wandering trappers and traders who penetrated into their domain. They ran off a few horses and stole a few furs and played similar pranks on the Pattie party in 1825, as well as on Ewing Young and others who trapped along the San Pedro and Gila Rivers, but these were like the practical jokes of a small boy. They reserved the full force of their skill in war, the extreme depths of their bottomless cruelty, for the Mexicans. This changed for the worse when the scalp bounty was inaugurated and many a "white-eye," the 'Pache equivalent of paleface, paid for the scalp-hunters' greed. Then the massacre of Mimbreno Apaches at the Copper Mines in 1837 caused Mexican and "white-

eye" to be lumped together in the Apache mind as twin evils.

News of the bounty on Indian hair, filtering slowly through the desert country, came finally to the ears of a man named Johnson and his partner, Gleason. It sounded like an easier way to make a living than did trapping. The beaver were getting thinned out and the King of France had set a new masculine fashion for silk hats in place of the tall beaver. The market for even prime pelts had slumped.

Johnson and his partner went to Chihuahua and secured letters certifying that they were duly registered scalpers in the government's employ. On their way to the Copper Mines, located in what is now southwestern New Mexico, just east of the last northward bend in the Gila River, they fell in with a party of Missourians, trappers under a man named Eames. They explained their new employment and sold the trappers on joining them. The whole party now numbered about thirty-five men, well-equipped with arms and skillful in their use. Johnson saw clearly that there was no profit in chasing single Indians through the rocks and brush—saw, too, that there was no sense in such procedure when you could get the Indians to come to you, in bunches.

With the aid of the mine owners, a great feast was given in the *plaza* of Santa Rita del Cobre to which the 'Pache for miles around were invited. Many came, and most of them died from the hospitality provided. Johnson concealed a cannon in an angle of the *plaza*, loaded to the muzzle with old pieces of iron, stones, bits of chain, musket balls, and anything else that was hard and handy. At the right time the Indians, being

drunk or stuffed to a sleepy indifference, the cannon was touched off and the trappers went in with knives and clubbed rifles to finish the job. They took almost 400 scalps for one afternoon's work. True, many of them were women and children but, even so, they all added up to a tidy sum when they were delivered to Ciudad Chihuahua.

The upshot of the affair was not what had been hoped. Mangas Colorados (Red Sleeves), a veritable giant of Apaches, escaped the Copper Mines disaster. Rallying his people—those that were left—and any others he could find, Mangas took quick, hot, and fearful vengeance for the slaughter of his people. An American named Kemp and his band of trappers, twenty-two in all, were wiped out on the upper Gila. Johnson, Gleason, Eames and their party were attacked in the Chiricahua Mountains; only a handful escaped. Most were killed quickly as they fought, but some died for an eternity hanging head downwards over a very slow fire. Mangas saved his fiercest savagery for the pitiful inhabitants of Santa Rita; the miners and their families.

First of all, Mangas cut off the *conductas*, the supply trains, that carried food to the mines from Sonora. Faced with starvation, the miners had to find food, and to find food they had to win through to Janos, the nearest village to the south. They set out bravely, their belongings piled high on whatever conveyance or animal they could find. Only a very few reached safety. The bones of over 300 bleached along the *via dolorosa* that stretched behind them to Santa Rita. They had fallen victim to either Mangas or the desert; the desert was merciful by comparison.

The battle between scalp-hunter and

Indian was fairly joined and into it rode James Kirker, Don Santiago Querque—truly *El Senor Scalp*. There have been few like Don Santiago, before or since. He saw the elephant and heard the owl in times, places, and situations where none had been before, and he left his mark.

James Kirker was born in Belfast, Ireland, in 1793, and emigrated to New York when a lad of seventeen. He served aboard an American privateer, *Black Jake*, during the War of 1812, was captured by the British, imprisoned, and eventually returned to New York as part of the exchange for the crew of the British man-o-war, *Java*. His restlessness drove him westward to St. Louis in 1817, and history remains silent on his activities for the next few years. It picks up his trail again in 1822, when he joined the company of General Ashley in St. Louis, bound for the Rocky Mountains and the beaver trade.

This force of General Ashley's saw many a man get his start in the mountains and numbered many already famous on the frontier. Kirker's comrades in the keelboats were such as Jim Bridger, then only seventeen years old; Jedediah Smith, who later blazed the overland trail to California; Hugh Glass, the old, scarred, grizzly-killer; Mike Fink, King of the Keelboatmen; and with blare of trumpets, the peer of all Mountain Men, Thomas Fitzpatrick, known to the Indians as Bad Hand or White Head. Kirker was moving in good company.

This force of Ashley's was badly mauled when it tried to pass the Aricaree villages on the Missouri—so badly mauled that it fell back downstream and sent for help. Colonel Leavenworth answered with his soldiers.

Leavenworth and Ashley couldn't see eye to eye—the age-old friction between frontiersman and soldier. While they squabbled, the 'Rees jeered at them from behind their stout palisades of logs and earth. Nothing happened. Ashley finally went up-river, overland, and Leavenworth went back to his fort. Kirker went with Leavenworth.

Don Santiago—still just plain Jim Kirker—went out to Santa Fé shortly after his return to St. Louis. He trapped and regained his health, which had been impaired by a fever contracted along the lowlands near the Missouri city. He had good luck as a trapper but not such good luck with Spanish officialdom. They confiscated all his furs because he was an alien and a heretic to boot.

Kirker took up his headquarters at the Copper Mines, whose owners were responsible to Chihuahua and not to Santa Fé. Here he stayed for eight years, trapping the Gila, Salt, and San Pedro Rivers in the fur season. He learned a great deal about Apache in this period and it is recorded that he lived with them as an equal. The dry pages of history whisper as they turn that he even led some of their most successful forays into Mexico. *Quien sabe?*

Kirker got into the good graces of a new governor in Santa Fé, Don Alvino Perez, about 1835. He was granted an official permit to trap and he did well. Too well! Perez declared him an outlaw, offered a reward in pesos equivalent to \$800 for him, dead or alive, and confiscated his property. Kirker left New Mexico in a hurry. As Old Blue used to say in the Tonto Basin War of later years: "I warn't never run out of Texas—hell no! I come out on a horse." Kirker made his way to Bent's Fort on the Arkansas

and there he stayed until Perez was killed in 1836.

Armijo succeeded Perez in the governor's chair and Kirker was *invited* to return to Santa Fé and, indeed, to any part of New Mexico that struck his fancy. This he did. There is little doubt that Kirker was hip-deep in the political mire of New Mexico at this time. He was a skillful frontiersman, ruthless, and of considerable intelligence. There were few like him in the province in those days and he could and did write his own ticket in exchange for his services and his support.

The bounty on scalps apparently left Kirker pretty cold until Mangas Colorados avenged the Copper Mines Massacre. Don Santiago may have done his friend, Governor Armijo, a favor now and again, like bringing him a bushel or two of ears, but his heart wasn't in it. Maybe because he had to split the bounties with his friend in power—again, *quien sabe?* Some time in 1837, however, Kirker entered the employ of the State of Chihuahua and assembled a personal force of fifty men for the sole purpose of hunting Indians for their hair.

He put together an unholy crew of retired Mountain Men, expatriate Shawnees under their celebrated chief, Spy-Buck, and those Ishmaels of the plains, the Delawares. They were competent workmen—too competent, as events later proved. Their first sortie was a howling success and netted them 182 scalps and eighteen captives.

It was too much of a good thing for the Governor of Chihuahua. He couldn't or wouldn't pay over the whole amount of bounties earned. Many of Kirker's American trappers left him at this turn of events, but he persevered with his

Shawnees and Delawares for some nine years right up to the outbreak of the Mexican War.

His own account says that his command accounted for 487 Indians during this period. However, other contemporary records indicate that he was overly modest. At the village of Galeana, Don Santiago and his command bagged 160 Apaches of all kinds; a single raid upon another Apache *rancheria* netted sixty-four warriors and women. These two incidents plus the one cited above total 406 scalps on hand. Over a nine-year period there must have been many more. This assumption is borne out by the sum owed Kirker when he joined the American Army under Colonel Doniphan.

Kirker joined Doniphan's column the night after the battle of Bracito. He was in his fifty-third year, over twenty-five of which had been spent on the plains and in the mountains. A surpassing horseman, he could lean from his running mount until his long hair swept the ground; he had the Comanche knack of hanging on the offside of his horse by one heel while at full gallop and firing either rifle or pistol with great accuracy. He was a rare and dangerous individual, and at the time he joined Doniphan the Chihuahuan government owed him \$30,000 for scalps taken and unpaid for.

Don Santiago Querque made quite an impression upon Doniphan's soldiers when he joined them as this eye-witness account shows:

"He was dressed in fringed buckskin hunting-shirt and breeches, heavy broad Mexican hat, and huge spurs, all embellished and ornamented with Mexican finery. He was mounted on a fine horse which he

regarded with great affection and to which he gave the most careful attention. In addition to a Hawkins rifle elegantly mounted and with silver inlaid on the stock, he was armed with a choice assortment of pistols and Mexican daggers."

He must have been quite a sight to the homespun-clad troopers who followed Doniphan. Kirker served Doniphan well as scout and guide, and performed several notable feats of daring, particularly at the battle of Sacramento.

The Mexicans, enraged at what they considered his perfidy at going over to the *Yanquis*, put a price of \$10,000 on his head. Since this was but a third of what they owed him, the account would have been advantageously settled had anyone laid Don Santiago low.

Kirker served until 1847 and then turned up in St. Louis. He remained in the city for a few months before returning to the western marches. At this point, history leaves him and his trail fades out in the wind-swept sand and lava rock of the Southwest.

One account says that he went to California in the gold rush and died there in 1853. Another, equally authentic, maintains that he retired to a great estate in Sonora and there lived out his days ever ready to defend himself against Indian or politician. Who knows? Only *El Senor Dios*!

The gold rush of '49 brought quite an upswing in the price of scalps—\$200 per male scalp. In addition, \$250 was paid for each captive delivered in a workable condition. Thousands of Mexican citizens left their homes for California, and the country lay defenseless before the Apache. Many of the emigrants who dared the southern trails to California from the Eastern

States in '49 paid their traveling expenses by roaching a few Indians as they passed through the country. One party of them, while chasing Apache, found that fabulous lost mine called Scalp-Hunters' Ledge, a great dyke of virgin silver, but that is another story in itself.

The bounty on scalps persisted into the early seventies of the last century. It did not do what it was designed to do—exterminate The Enemy, the Apache—but it did provide a fascinating chapter in the warfare and settlement of the great South-west.



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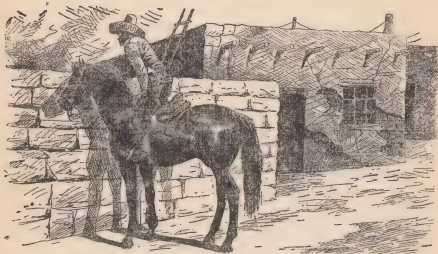
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NAME

ADDRESS

The Hammer Thumb

By EUGENE CUNNINGHAM



AT THE URGENT REQUEST of the town council, Ware's Kid, on the trail of "Red Sleeves," stops over for a rough night in Las Tunas. The tough elements are aiming to take advantage of the temporarily marshal-less condition of the town, and although young Ranger Ware can't accept the job of deputy marshal offered him he admits he is available for emergency duty anywhere, any time, on call. Action follows. This story was first published back in the twenties.

WARE'S KID made the stage station in the half hour before noon. The tall black stallion halted without signal before the 'dobe corral, from which rose clouds of dust and the sound of men's angry voices. As he leaned over the corral wall and peered through the swirling dust a faint twinkle showed far back in the gray-green eyes that were shaded by the huge silver-

embroidered sombrero. For very evidently a mule was to be shod, and—also, very evidently—the mule was registering violent objection. Three men were moving about him cautiously with lariats circling; and finally, caught by three legs, the mule crashed flat.

There were three of them, Ware's Kid noted, where ordinarily there would have been but one. He thought that none

of the trio understood the reason for this unusual guarding of the stage line. He himself knew very well, for the reason was the same one which had moved him from the Rangers' camp well before dawn that day. It was only a two-word reason, but those two words had power to lower men's voices; to cause furtive glances over-shoulder; to render nervous even the hard-bitten cowhands over 200 miles of country. The two words were—"Red Sleeves."

He rode usually with two followers, this bandit who struck with such uncanny accuracy at the stages. He never struck at a point where he was expected to appear; the stage he stopped always carried treasure, either in the money box or on the person of some passenger. Having looted it, Red Sleeves and his followers vanished as into thin air. Twice they had left dead men behind them.

One thing only was definitely known about him and that was the result of a deduction on the part of Captain Knowles of the Ranger company; a deduction made only a few days before. Checking up on the various details of the half-dozen robberies credited to Red Sleeves, a regularity about the interval separating each robbery from the next had impressed Knowles.

Three months, within a very few days, had elapsed each time between the outlaw's activities, and—it now lacked but a couple of days of the time for another robbery. It was this thought which had led Knowles first to warn the stage company to post extra guards, and then detail young Ware to search for the elusive Red Sleeves gang. Almost his only clue was knowledge that the bandit leader always wore a red shirt.

It was this which had given him his *nom de guerre*.

"Dinner?" inquired the Ranger of the three heavily armed men, who turned to stare curiously at his Mexican finery, his awkwardly hung white-handled Colt.

They nodded, and the regular stage keeper went off to the 'dobe bunk-house that was built against the mouth of a cave in one of the low hills that marked this little halting place of the stages.

When he had eaten, Ware's Kid rested for a while in the shade of the cabin wall, smoking silently or replying in monosyllables to the remarks of guards or keeper. Not a word did he hear of Red Sleeves.

The lazy drumming of the stallion's hoofs in the sand roused no apparent interest anywhere upon the dusty street of Las Tunas, which was walled in by twin lines of low 'dobes spotted here and there by new brick buildings. Ware's Kid reined in the stallion and gazed thoughtfully down the nearly deserted thoroughfare.

It seemed that every third or fourth door upon the street opened into a saloon. There was one on his right, just ahead. Before it stood a battered and reeling hitching-post, against which a Mexican youth leaned drowsily, with sandaled feet projecting into the path that served as sidewalk.

From this saloon now swaggered a huge dark man in a broad black hat, red flannel shirt, and overalls that were thrust into the tops of half-boots. He paused for an instant to stare incuriously at the small figure in Mexican clothing sitting the great stallion, then turned to go upstreet—and cruelly trampled

the toes of a Mexican youth with high boot heels.

The boy cried out shrilly, staggered sidewise, and fell flat upon his back in the dust. The big man eyed him carelessly from the corner of a black eye—much as if he had been a stick or other unimportant, inanimate thing. The Mexican, from where he lay, glowered at the trampler. A glint of teeth showed wolfishly between his snarling lips. This the big man saw.

"Why, dam' yo' yaller soul!" he remarked deliberately.

With a single stride he was standing over the Mexican. The heavy quirt looped to his left hand whistled up, then descended with a terrific *whish!* to curl about the Mexican's shoulders. The boy couldn't get away, for the big man's boot pinned one hand to the dust. He could only writhe and cringe as the quirt mercilessly rose and fell.

The Ranger's lean brown face hardened as he watched. It was a hard day in all the vast western country and men were not much moved by ordinary brutality. So it was the cold, passionless manner of the big man which roused in Ware's Kid a slow-rising anger which he could not explain.

The big man looked up sidewise, without change of expression, as the stallion's shadow fell across him.

"Reckon," drawled the boyish-looking Ranger almost gently, "this'll be all!"

"Yo' reckonin'," replied the big man without apparent interest, "is plumb out!"

Then the quirt leaped up again and once more curled about the Mexican.

To a mountainous, white-haired man in broad straw hat and snowy linens, who was now framed in the saloon door-

way, it seemed that half a dozen things occurred simultaneously, with an abruptness that could be likened only to an explosion.

The black's shoulder cannoned into the big man with the quirt—the Ranger was on the ground—the big man's wrist was seized and twisted deftly—his feet were kicked from under him with what seemed the same movement—his body described a half-arc in the air that ended when his face plowed into the dust of the street.

When he scrambled to his haunches—clawing frantically for a Colt which had sailed from its holster—he was promptly knocked down again by a flashing knee which collided with an eye. Still fumbling for the absent gun butt, he was permitted to get to his feet, only to be measured by a stabbing left hand and knocked unconscious by a terrific looping right.

Two others stood now behind the enormous old man in the saloon door, peering over his shoulders. These elbowed past him; hard-faced men, both. They glanced down at the sprawling figure and back with a sort of curious menace at the easy-postured Ranger. They made no hostile move—only stooped, gathered up the senseless one, and staggered inside the saloon with him.

Ware's Kid was reaching for the stallion's reins when the mountainous white-haired man addressed him in piping tenor.

"Howdy, son!"

Ware's Kid turned a slow head, gray-green eyes probing the old man's guileless red face. Then gravely he nodded.

"That—" the big white head jerked slightly toward the saloon door—"was a right good job—but dangerous."

The Ranger waited. They faced each other silently—the small figure in short jacket of soft tanned goat-skin, loose Mexican-cut trousers of blue woolen, bellling over high-heeled boots, and the vast figure in wide straw hat and immaculate linen suit that gleamed so incongruously in the shabby street.

"Come over to my store, son, if you don't mind. I'd like to talk to you a spell," said the big man at length.

They crossed the street and entered a new brick building which bore across its front a sign proclaiming general merchandise and announcing Dave Barrow as proprietor. The store, without and within, was like its owner: prosperous-seeming and comfortable and orderly.

It was a much more elaborate establishment than Ware's Kid had ever seen before in the range country. Dave Barrow led the way to the rear and the Ranger noted the respect with which the old man was greeted by the dozen or so customers who were being waited upon by several white and Mexican clerks. He began to understand that Dave Barrow was a person of importance in Las Tunas.

Barrow stood aside at the door of a large, pleasantly cool, and dusky room, which had been made by a partition stretching from wall to wall of the store itself. There was a huge desk, a few easy chairs, a rack with many newspapers—precious things in that country—and a great bookcase in the corner.

Dave Barrow motioned toward a chair, but Ware's Kid shook his head and squatted upon his heels against the wall. Likewise he refused a cigar from the red Mexican *olla* in which the storekeeper kept them secure against the penetrating dryness of that latitude. He produced thick yellow-brown papers and inky

Mexican tobacco, made a cigarette, lit it with a match from his hatband and waited, his sagging posture reminiscent of a drowsing cow pony at a hitch-rack.

"I'd like to offer you a job," said Dave Barrow after a space. He paused and stared thoughtfully at the wall, with rolling chins sunk upon his chest. "Las Tunas right now is in a hell of a fix!" he exploded.

His piping tenor was almost childishly querulous, but Ware's Kid, skilled far beyond his years in the reading of men, sensed a force in the fat man quite in keeping with his great bulk. He waited.

"When we was just a cow town, certain things was all well enough. But we're goin' to be a city right soon. White folks here sat and prayed—all nine of 'em—for a railroad. Now, we're goin' to have four railroads!

"Minute the word spread that build-in' was goin' to begin, we started to get new settlers. Good folks, bad folks, an' indifferent—though you would think, to see our two streets at night, that the whole blame' town was just gamblers an' saloonkeepers an' variety girls and that sort o' sportin' crowd! They've been tryin' to run Las Tunas. But some o' us oldtimers got together an' organized a town council. They made me president.

"We built a jail an' we hired a city marshal an' we give him a deputy an' told him to keep the town halfway quiet. But our marshal got to be too good friends with the sportin' crowd. He couldn't make arrests without trampling on his friends' corns.

"Yesterday mornin' we let him out an' made the deputy actin' marshal. I telegraphed to a man I know up-country an' offered him the job. He said he'd take it, but it'll be a day or

two before he can get here. Last night I found the actin' marshal crazy-drunk in Williams's Variety Theater an' I fired him right there. So—tonight Las Tunas will have no police force.

"Nobody knows about my telegraphin' my friend. Son, we're sure in a fix to-night! The sportin' crowd is goin' to shoot us up. They're goin' to prove to the town council that Las Tunas needs a two-gun marshal—needs Louis Sanders. But, whilst they're a-doin' this provin', some grudges are naturally goin' to be settled. Some folks'll be killed. Some more'll be hurt right bad. Property belongin' to the decent folks'll be kindlin' wood tomorrow, if—

"Son, will you take a job as deputy marshal—actin' marshal until my man gets here? When I saw you clean Louis Sanders's plow, I thought to myself. *Here's the man that's the answer to the question I've been askin' myself all day.*"

"Who's Louis Sanders?" inquired Ware's Kid.

"He was the marshal. Will you help us out, son? Will you take a job as deputy marshal?"

Ware's Kid shook his head. "Can't," he said. "Against the law."

Barrow's red face grew sorrowful.

"But," said Ware's Kid, "yuh can call on me to ride herd on the town, if yuh want to. For I'm a Ranger, yuh see!"

Las Tunas's two principal streets formed a capital T. North Street, some six blocks long, was the top bar; East Street, a little longer, formed the vertical staff.

Evidently word of the humbling of Louis Sanders had gone on wings about Las Tunas, for Ware's Kid, looking the town over thoughtfully that afternoon,

was conscious of stares more numerous, more curious, than his Mexican clothing, the white-handled Colt hung awkwardly high, or the sleek carbine cuddled in his arm, warranted. But his blank face showed no sign that he noticed, as he studied the geography of Las Tunas in detail.

He came presently to the Three Jacks Saloon at the far extremity of East Street—the saloon outside of which he had met Sanders. He was passing with eyes roving slowly when he noted that in the gray dust around the hitchpost the traces of Sanders's several falls had not yet been effaced. A couple of loungers in the saloon doorway eyed him with cold calculation while he stood staring at the ruffled dust.

He turned after a moment, staring at them expressionlessly, but to remember; then went on at his awkward, high-heeled horseman's gait across the street and back toward the center of town. As he went his eyes were narrowed thoughtfully and far back in their gray-green depths was shining an odd, cold light that, with him, marked anticipation of swiftest action. His thin mouth was lifted a little at one corner in the faintest of shadowy smiles.

The marshal's office was only a tiny room in the new brick jail which stood perhaps a hundred feet off North Street. There was a Chinese restaurant at the corner of the little side street leading to the jail. Here Ware's Kid ate a large supper, then strolled down to the office. He found two ten-gauges shotguns with sawed-off barrels leaning in a corner.

These he inspected, then regretfully hid his carbine in a pile of odds and ends in one corner and picked up the shotguns. With both of them across his arm he went back up to North Street. At one

corner of the intersection of North and East Streets was the great Criterion Saloon and gambling-rooms. Next door to it was a hardware store, in the door of which stood a bareheaded man, a lean, bitter-faced, one-legged man. Ware's Kid crossed the street and nodded to this one. He had seen that the sign announced the proprietor as John Curran.

"Boss?" he asked.

After a long, probing stare, the bare-headed man nodded.

"Complete," he grunted. "I'm Curran. You're the Ranger. What can I do for you?"

"Shells," said Ware's Kid briefly, when they stood inside the dusky, crowded store. Curran nodded, glanced at the shotguns, then went stumping behind the counter, his wooden leg clumping against the floor with an angry sound as if with each step he voiced his resentment at being crippled.

"No damages," he snapped, when he had laid a box of ten-gauge shells before the Ranger.

Again he favored Ware's Kid with that long, probing stare. Then suddenly he whirled and pulled down a large cardboard box, opened it, and produced a queer-looking vest of light calfskin to the sides of which were sewed pistol holsters.

"Take off your jumper," he commanded, and, after a moment of hesitation, Ware's Kid obeyed. "Put this on!"

Ware's Kid slipped his arms through the vest and the merchant, bending forward across the counter, buckled the vest together. The two holsters rested now beneath Ware's arms. From the high-hung belt holster he drew his seldom-used Colt and shoved it into one of the holsters of the vest. It hung

at a canny slant. Curran grunted again and whirled for another box, from which he produced the mate to the Ranger's six-shooter and shoved it into the second holster.

"Now!" he snarled. "That's the John Wesley Hardin quick-draw outfit. You cross your arms as you draw. Practice a little and you can be chain lightning."

Ware's Kid shook his head slowly, a trifle regretfully, staring down at the outfit. "Some other time, mebbe. Right now—not enough money."

"Who asked you for money?" snarled Curran. "Reckon I belong to the town council, same as Dave Barrow! Reckon I can appreciate your sticking around to buck the whole town. Here, load that other gun. You'll likely need it before morning."

From Dave Barrow Ware's Kid had received rapid-fire thumbnail sketches of the town prominents. So he knew that the Williams brothers were fomentors of everything evil in Las Tunas; that Joe Billings, who owned the Criterion, was labeled one in the confidence neither of such belligerent leaders of the sporting crowd as the Williams brothers nor that of the town council; while "Hook-Hand" Terry, owner of the Congress Saloon, was a man to tie to.

Ware's Kid went, neither slow nor fast, up East Street to the Congress Saloon. The streets were beginning to fill with a leisurely, flashily dressed throng. Gamblers there were, by the dozen almost, in broad hats, funereal frock coats, gaudy waistcoats, and mirror-bright boots; shrill-voiced, heavily rouged women in brilliant low-cut silk dresses—each well-squired; slinking, furtive figures that seemed to trail like coyotes at the heels of taller members of the half-

world; cowmen and their punchers stumping along awkwardly—like Ware's Kid—on high boot-heels; bearded miners, usually in knots of two or three.

Ware's Kid drew curious, oftentimes menacing glances from many of those he passed. Eyes flickered from the twin shot guns across his arm to lean, blank face—then back again.

At the door of the Congress Saloon he paused for a swift glance at the crowd inside. At the long bar's end was visible Hook-Hand Terry himself—a huge man, nearly bald of bullet head, with red bull throat constricted by a shiny rubber collar, with a diamond the size of a filbert twinkling in his vast shirt front. Hook-Hand's bare elbows rested upon the bar; the iron hook—substitute for the left hand lost in some ancient, unnamed naval battle—gripped absently by a hamlike right first that was intricately tattooed almost to the fingernails.

Ware's Kid came inside and down the barroom. The saloonkeeper's small blue eyes narrowed for an instant at sight of the Ranger's burden, then he smiled and nodded approvingly.

"Sure, ut's quite a battery ye have, me son!" he boomed.

"Want to leave a Greener with yuh," said Ware's Kid. "Stick her back o' the bar so's I can git her if the's call."

Hook-hand again nodded approvingly. "An' is ut loaded?" he inquired.

"Nope. Aim to be *sho'* about my shells. I'll load her when I take her."

"Oh, ho!" Hook-Hand's little eyes narrowed again. He nodded violently. "Sure, ut's in me mind that the b'y has seen some av the trials and tribulations av this wicked wurld. An' seen 'em through the smoke!"

"Why—" thus Ware's Kid very sol-

emnly—" 't would mess up other business I got right smart—stayin' in Las Tunas permanent!"

Darkness had come and the kerosene lamps were lit. More and more people appeared upon the sidewalks. Ware's Kid had no means of knowing for what hour the shooting-up of the town was scheduled, but it seemed to him that right now was the proper time to begin what he termed, mentally, his "night-herdin'."

He went back down East Street and turned wide around the corner of North Street. Already crowds stood along the Criterion's bar and about the games in the great adjoining room. He did not go in, but continued along North Street until he was opposite the Williamses' great Gem Variety Theater, which marked the end of the lighted section of town.

As he stood there in the shadows beneath the wooden awning of a shabby saloon, Ware's Kid became conscious of droning voices from within the place. Evidently this saloon was not much patronized; the dingy front wore an apathetic resignation to neglect. He went softly to the door and peered around the jamb. Two old men stood midway down the bar with untouched drinks before them. Another leather-faced oldster with patriarchal white beard was behind the bar. The shorter of the drinkers was in the middle of an account of an Indian fight when Ware's Kid came in.

"Howdy," he grunted. "Ranger. Ridin' herd tonight?"

"Howdy," nodded the old bartender, but there was no friendliness in his face.

The two old men opposite him also stared calculatingly at the smallish figure in Mexican clothing. They seemed to

be weighing him, without being particularly impressed in his favor. Ware's Kid regarded the three of them with a slow turn of the head, gray-green eyes turning frosty, with that odd electric glow shining far back. He waited, but they merely eyed him steadily.

"Was goin' to cache this Greener with yuh," he drawled. "But—" Eloquently he spat and was turning back to the door when the voice of Curran, the hardware man, sounded behind him.

"The boy's all right, Jim Briggs! Don't you old mountain cats be combing him. I reckon all of you have heard of Bill Ware? Well—"

Old Jim Briggs leaned suddenly across the bar and stared into the Ranger's face. "Bill Ware's kid?" he cried. "Him as downed Black Alec Rawles? Son! I knowed yo' pappy thirty year back an' I've heerd a deal about his kid. If the's anything in this-yere place ye want—just take her!" He thrust out a gnarled paw, beaming.

Ware's Kid shook hands, then laid the shotgun upon the bar. "Keep 'er handy," he requested. "Now, I got to ride herd some."

"Just a minute, Ware," said Curran, and Ware's Kid turned back to where the quartet were grouped together, whispering.

Old Jim Briggs had brought up three shotguns from beneath the bar and was scooping up double handfuls of shells to lay beside them.

"We're sort of old and puny," drawled Curran, "but if any shooting starts tonight, I reckon the four of us'll get a little lunch while the Williams crowd is having a full meal!"

And, while Ware's Kid watched with shadowy, grateful smile, the hardware

man hauled up, from where it had hung inside his pants leg on a rawhide thong, a sawed-off shotgun.

"I never could hit a barn a-wing with a Colt," confessed Curran, "but any dam' fool can shoot this thing!"

"Thanks a heap," nodded the Ranger, then went out.

As he made his second patrol of the lighted section of town. Ware's Kid fancied that a certain indefinable tension was present in the bearing, the expression of those he met. But as he went briskly along, glancing in at the Criterion, then turning up East Street, none made any hostile move. Nor did he see Louis Sanders anywhere.

Now soft hurrying footsteps sounded behind him. He turned—to face that Mexican youth he had saved from Louis Sanders's quirt.

"*Senor!*" whispered the boy. "There is much talk in town tonight. In the Three Jacks Saloon friends of that *diablo*, Sanders, threaten to kill you! Particularly the bartender. He vows that no accursed Ranger can put shame upon a friend of his and live. He has said that he will kill you upon sight. And he is *un hombre malo!* In his time in Las Tunas, he has already slain two men."

"*Gracias!*" nodded Ware's Kid. "I shall not forget your friendly warning."

He walked on until he was out of the brightly lit part of the street, then slid noiselessly forward a few paces and halted with back to a blank 'dobe wall, in deep shadow. As he stood staring up and down he bethought him of the two Colts that hung, butts front, beneath his arms. He tried the cross-arm draw a few times and found it very simple. The guns came out flashingly.

Almost across from where he lurked was the Three Jacks Saloon. He walked over and went inside, wondering if he would find here Louis Sanders. But the ex-marshal was not among the dozen or more roughly dressed, hard-faced men who were drinking noisily, served by a rat-faced little bartender. Silence fell with his entrance; quite openly the patrons of the Three Jacks glowered at the Ranger. He bore himself precisely as if the bar were deserted.

The bartender—evidently the man of whom the Mexican boy had spoken—came like a cat up the bar and stood staring straight into the eyes of the Ranger.

"Sarsaparilla," drawled Ware's Kid.

"So you come here, did you?" said the bartender in a low voice.

Ware's Kid eyed him thoughtfully and the bartender returned his gaze without the slightest wavering of his own.

"So you come here, did you?" he repeated. "You think, mebbe, that you're goin' to git away with the bluff, do you?"

There was that about his tense posture, but most of all about his eyes, which assured Ware's Kid that he faced now a real killer and one on the verge of a killing. But, for all that he was tense as a coiled spring, he merely watched the bartender with deceptive quiet.

A sudden wave of blood flushed the sallow face, then the bartender's right hand—which had all this time been concealed behind the bar—flashed into sight, bringing up a shiny revolver. But swiftly as it came, the Ranger's left hand moved more rapidly still.

The weapon was of the type usually scorned in the cow country—a stubby "center-break" double-action. Ware's Kid seized it; thumb and forefinger lifted the

releasing lever; the heel of his palm depressed the barrel; it "broke" on its hinge and snapped shells back against the bartender's front. Then Ware's Kid had the revolver and was gripping the bartender by the collar. Holding the little weapon like a club, he smashed it into the bartender's temple, then dropped it as he let the senseless figure slide down behind the bar. He jerked one of his Colts and with it menaced the astonished drinkers. For a minute he stared them down, then backed toward the door. Here he halted for an instant.

"Tell him"—he jerked his head toward the spot where the bartender lay—"if he's in town t'morrow, he'll sho' stay—real permanent!"

He left that neighborhood swiftly, whirled down a cross street and ducked into an alley; stepped out again upon East Street a block farther on. He stood for an instant upon the sidewalk, then went quickly inside the nearest saloon and out the back door, to move rapidly along the alley of that block. Near its end he entered the rear door of a saloon, went straight through it, out the front door, and crossed the street to repeat the maneuver on that side.

In fifteen minutes the town saw him ten times! He was here and there, appearing so noiselessly, vanishing so instantly, that men began to keep a sort of nervous watch for him. At last, as he stood flattened against the wall in a dark alley mouth, two men stopped on the lighted sidewalk almost within arm's length.

"Where's that dam' Ranger?" one asked the other nervously.

"Dam' if I know!" answered the other. "But I know I see him five times in the

last four minutes—an' I ain't had nine drinks tonight!"

"Same here," snarled the first one. "My Gawd! You might think he was triplets or somethin'!"

Ware's Kid grinned. Then suddenly he stiffened.

"Believe the boys is ready to start!" snapped one of the men. They whirled and ran down North Street toward the Gem Variety Theater.

Ware's Kid listened. At first there was but the usual clamor of that noisy street. Then came a dull undertone which swelled and swelled. It was the voice of a mob—but a mob, he sensed, which was mechanically working itself into a fury. But he knew that, once under way, mere momentum would carry it far. It must be checked in its beginning, else the sun would rise upon a town half destroyed—upon dead men.

Cautiously he peered out around the building-corner. Before the Gem, a few doors down the street, it seemed that North Street was filled from wall to wall. He whirled and sprinted down the alley, circled the block behind the Gem, crossed North Street well in the crowd's rear and so came to the back door of Jim Briggs's saloon. Briggs, with Curran and the two other old men, was peering cautiously out the front door. At the scuff of feet they whirled like cats and the gaping muzzles of four sawed-off shotguns covered Ware's Kid.

"Gi' me my Greener!" he panted. Then, without waiting, he laid a hand upon the bar, vaulted over, scooped up the shotgun, and came into the center of the barroom again in the same manner. He broke the gun and jammed in two shells.

"Where yuh goin'?" demanded Curran,

checking with steely fingers the Ranger's rush through the front door.

"Goin' to start 'em millin' befo' they stampede," said Ware's Kid grimly, but with that cool light in his gray-green eyes.

"Reckon we'll trail along," said Curran, and Jim Briggs nodded.

The yelling mob, listening to two or three ringleaders, failed to observe the quintet that scattered to strategic points along its line, until Ware's Kid—with shotgun weaving deliberately in a wide arc that menaced many men—lifted his voice in a terrific yell. Instant silence fell. They whirled, to face the small figure that grinned at them terribly.

"'Twas all a mistake!" shouted Ware's Kid. "The' ain't goin' to be no riot!"

They gaped at him, robbed of initiative by his audacity, sure that, somehow, he concealed a trick. He had them checked, he knew, but he must start them moving in the way he intended before they recovered. The leaders had melted into the crowd somehow. Then suddenly came the voice of Louis Sanders:

"Yuh goin' to let one kid bluff yuh? Kill him an' let's go!"

But instantly, from another angle, came a voice that made either the Ranger's or Louis Sanders's seem childish.

"Shut up!" it commanded. It was Jim Briggs, and sight of his weaving shotgun confirmed the crowd's belief in a trick. Curran and the other shotgun bearers, sensing the psychological effect to be gained, each, with a whoop, called attention to himself.

"Now, scatteh!" barked Ware's Kid suddenly. "An' stay scatteh! Don't yuh go gangin' up again anywheres tonight. There's heaps more'n us in this town!"

He waved expansively at the second

story windows that loomed darkly mysterious above the street. "Git an' stay got!"

There was an instant's hesitancy, a tiny space of complete silence while the crowd searched for the faces—waited for the command—of its leaders, and in that silence, from five sides sounded metallic clicks as the hammers trembled upon four sawed-off shotguns.

Slowly, the crowd began to mill. Ware's Kid, standing in the center of the street, moved swiftly backward and let them by. Men poured past him nervously, but at each doorway the crowd diminished. In ninety seconds, there were not upon that particular block the numbers which ordinarily it would have held at noontime.

"They're licked," declared Curran as the five of them gathered in Jim Briggs's bar. "You couldn't get 'em together again with a broom. They figure there's a young army watching 'em. Tomorrow night—well, maybe it'll be to do all over again."

"Tomorrow night," grunted Ware's Kid, picking up his glass, "it'll be the new marshal's job. How!" He drained the glass ceremoniously. "Well," he said, "betteh show myself around some more. I'm real obleeged to yuh-all. Hadn't helped me out, way yuh did, neveh could've pulled that off."

"Sho'," they grinned, "'twas nothin'."

Ware's Kid had never been inside either the Gem or the Criterion. Outside Jim Briggs's place he stopped for a moment to listen to the voice of the Gem, then, satisfied that it was noisy now but not menacing, he went up North Street to the great saloon and gambling-hall of Joe Billings. The Criterion consisted of two huge rooms

separated by a thin partition. One was the saloon; the other the gambling-room. The private card rooms, Ware's Kid knew, were upstairs.

At the Criterion's bar, drinking, were not only the sporting crowd—though there were more of these than would be found in Hook-Hand Terry's Congress—but respectable citizens. As he came down the barroom many of the latter nodded cordially. Apparently word had spread of the quelling of the riot. He refused, with headshakes, offers of a dozen drinks and moved over to the great gilded archway that led into the gambling-room.

There was a tense sort of order prevailing among the groups around the several games and, satisfied with his inspection, he was about to turn back toward the bar when he heard a sort of snarl behind him and a scuffling of many feet at the bar—which he recognized instantly as the movement of men to right and left, out of range.

"So the' yuh are!" snarled Louis Sanders.

Ware's Kid, cursing mentally that he had been surprised by the man he had been hunting, turned very slowly. Evidently Sanders had been drinking. His face, marked by Ware's fists, was darkly flushed. He stood with feet somewhat apart, leaning a little forward. The quirt looped to his left hand—which he seemed never to discard—was *tap-tapping* his boot toe. The tiny red veins were swollen around his eyes. His teeth showed beneath the long black mustache. He was in a killing humor, no doubt of that, and his hand was upon the white butt of his Colt. Ware's Kid surveyed him blankly from beneath drooping lids.

"So yuh're goin' to kill me on sight, are yuh?" cried Sanders, and Ware's Kid had to admire the man for pausing, at a moment like this, to build up some slight justification for a killing.

"Who told yuh that?" he drawled curiously.

"Yuh can't fool me that way," roared Sanders and Ware's Kid saw his big fingers quivering upon the Colt's butt. He knew the signs.

"Don't yuh pull a gun on me! Don't yuh pull that gun!" cried Sanders.

"Ain't pullin' no gun!" Ware's Kid lifted his hands so that they were palm outward before his breast. Steadily he stared into the red-veined eyes of the ex-marshal—and folded his arms. "But turn loose yo' six-shooter or I'll down yuh."

Sanders's fingers closed hard upon the butt of his Colt. But as it lifted a little from the holster, Ware's Kid jerked both his pistols.

Sanders, as Dave Barrow had warned Ware's Kid, was something of a gunman himself. He had drawn the white-handled Colt from the holster and only by the thinnest of margins did Ware's Kid flip back the hammer first.

Men watching from the rear saw the thumb of Sanders's gun hand, the thumb that was crooked to jerk back the hammer, torn abruptly from the hand, by a bullet—saw Sanders throw the gun into his left hand with the flashing "border shift." But by that time Ware's Kid had fired three times more and Sanders's bullet went wild.

The ex-marshal crashed face downward on the floor.

As Ware's Kid leaned forward with Colts covering the still figure, a pistol shot sounded from the rear of the room.

There was a metallic clang and Ware's Kid staggered. Then he recovered himself, whirled upon a heel, and sent five bullets at a squat, sandy-haired man who stood almost against the rear wall with smoking six-shooter in his hand. As the pungent smoke wreathed slowly up toward the great cut-glass chandeliers, the squat man sagged to the floor and lay still.

In the silence of the great barroom sounded now a single muffled thud. Ware's Kid, whose nerves were on edge, whirled like a cat in the direction of the sound, with both Colts at hip level.

"Don't worry, Ware," Dave Barrow's piping tenor counseled him. "I laid this'n' out myself. He was fixin' to take a shot at you."

Ware's Kid nodded, but almost absently. He stood in the barroom's center with eyes shuttling from the body of the squat, sandy-haired man against the far wall to that of Louis Sanders. Suddenly he stooped beside the latter.

Sanders lay with arms outflung; the heavy quirt, still looped to his left hand, curling around the arm like a dead snake. Very deliberately Ware's Kid began to roll Sanders's coat sleeves to the elbow. When he had finished, he stood up, and all in the barroom and in the packed doorway of the gambling rooms were staring. He motioned toward Sanders.

"Know him?" he demanded.

There was an instant of puzzlement, then they answered him with a sudden amazed roar:

"Red Sleeves!"

For from elbow to wrist Sanders's arms were covered with the red flannel of his shirt sleeves.

"I come down Las Tunas-way a-lookin' for him. Thought mebbe he'd

hunt cover in a crowd. Figuhed, too, he'd be about ready to start on anotheh job. Remember, all his jobs was about three months apart? Was lookin' for a man with a scar in his left palm. In four-five robberies they found in the dust, where the gang had squatted waitin' for the stage, a left handprint with a scar across it. Today, I knocked this fella down. Lateh on, happened to notice the print o' his left hand. Well! That quirt-loop across his hand makes a mark mighty like a scar—good enough to fool a body. An' I reckon carryin' that quirt was a strong habit o' Sanders's."

"Nobody ever saw him without it!" nodded Dave Barrow. "But these two fellows here?"

"His gang," grunted Ware's Kid. "If I ain't mistook."

"We can mighty soon find out!" This was Curran, the hardware man, who shoved through the crowd to the side of Dave Barrow and his prisoner. "Anybody got a rope?" he inquired.

Someone slipped out the door and brought in a lariat from his saddle. Very deftly, Curran tied a hangman's noose. Dave Barrow, with small eyes twinkling, took a glass of whisky from the bar, forced open the mouth of his victim and poured the liquor down.

The man, a tow-haired, furtive-faced individual, coughed violently. His eyes opened and after a moment he sat up—to behold Curran, ferociously grim of expression, bearing down upon him with suggestively dangling noose. The prisoner scrambled to his feet, but Dave Barrow gripped his arm and held him as if he had been a child. Curran stopped and turned to the tense watchers as for final affirmation.

"Then you're all agreed that he is Red Sleeves? And that there's no use bothering to wait, since he's been tried fair and square?"

A rumbling murmur of assent answered him.

The prisoner gaped fearfully at the sinister noose. "Red Sleeves!" he cried shrilly. "Hell! I ain't Red Sleeves! That was Sanders. Oh, I admit I rode with him, but 'twas 'cause I was skeered not to! You wouldn't hang me! I'll tell you all about it! But don't hang me, gentlemen! For God's sake—"

"And that," grinned Curran, "is that!"

The doorway of Dave Barrow's store was rather well filled in the hour of early morning coolness. Curran and Dave Barrow, with a waspish-looking little man between them, were glancing with vast satisfaction up and down the pleasingly unmarred lines of buildings on North Street.

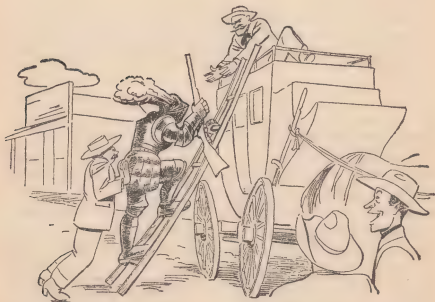
"Well, the' goes Ware's Kid!" remarked Park Cheyne, the waspish-looking one. He polished the star upon his vest with a cuff and stared absently after the diminishing horseman, who was now well out on the trail to the Rangers' camp.

"Call him by his own name!" growled old Curran, turning quickly upon the new marshal of Las Tunas. "That's Ware—Texas Ranger. He can stand on his own legs. He don't have to get by on account of being somebody's kid. No, sir! He's an uncombed flash of lightning with a big slab of rock for a backbone and a barb-wire fence all around! Call him by his name as you'd call any other man!"

IT'S WINDY ON THE PLAINS

"Does the wind blow like this all the time?" asked the tenderfoot, struggling to keep himself upright.

"Oh, no," answered the cowboy. "It may blow like this for a week or so, but then it'll change and blow like hell for a few days."



"The express company don't aim to lose their last shotgun-messenger!"

Ace of Spades Wins the Pot

By J. E. GRINSTEAD



WHEN TOBE CANDLESS, inveterate poker player, names his new spread the "Ace of Spades" he has a special, perhaps sentimental, reason for doing so. And when the powerful Jayback outfit actively begins to resent the presence of the Ace of Spades on the range Tobe stakes everything to win the biggest pot he has ever played for. This range-war novelette was first published in the magazine *Frontier Stories* in 1928.

IT all began in the old Sunflower gambling-room at Dodge City, Kansas. Tobe Candless had been a persistent cow-camp poker player ever since he had been a cowpuncher—and that meant ever since he was big enough to fork a horse. He had, likewise, been a persistent and consistent loser. He always lacked one little card in the showdown. It was a favourite saying of Tobe's, "If I'd just had one leetle card more, I'd 'a' win that pot." Then when he was cleaned to his gun and saddle, he'd go on working until he got another stake. It takes a shock to break a habit like that—and Tobe got one. He was forty-five, had a wife and a grown daughter, but was still a

cowboy. Many of his old side-partners had ranches of their own.

"I know, Em, it's a bad habit, but I don't get drunk and beat you up none," he'd say when Mrs. Candless would roll him about gambling. "I've put a lot into this poker business. If I could ever win one good pot and get back something like what I lost in poker games, I'd quit."

Tobe was telling his wife good-by as he started up the trail from Brown County, Texas, when he made that talk. He was a born cowman and knew the business from every angle—always sober and a willing worker, a top hand in every way. The boss didn't care what he did with his money, for he certainly

earned it. He had been "up the trail" so often that he knew every water hole and creek crossing. He could palaver with the Indians and get a better deal out of them for crossing their reservations than anybody. He did as much work, and was worth more to the outfit, than any other two men, but nobody would make him trail boss. A trail boss had to handle money, and Tobe couldn't have money in his pockets without gambling it. Not that he was dishonest. He was as square as men are made, but he had the habit and always thought he was going to win.

The big herd finally won its way to Dodge after the worst trip in history. No water, short grass, trouble with Indians, dry-weather thunderstorms, big "runs," and every other mean thing that trail-drivers ever had to contend with.

When the grizzled old trail boss paid his men off, he looked Tobe over. "Tobe, you're just a damned curiosity to me," he said. "You're the best cowhand I ever saw. You got more guts than a six-year-old steer and more cow sense than a cuttin' horse, but—that's all you have got. You ain't got as much sense as a road runner about anything else on earth."

"Thank you kindly," grinned Tobe, "but they's one thing you overlooked to say. I can handle keerds right smart, too."

"That's just what I was thinking about. You handle cards just like you do cattle—for somebody else! If you had a little ranch of your own, with all the cow sense you got, and would stick to it like you do to poker, you'd make a killin'. You've done about four men's work on this trip and saved the outfit plenty money. I aim to pay you double wages, but hadn't I better just give you a coupla

hundred and take the balance back to Em and Cal? That daughter of yo'n would know what to do with it. She's got about as much cow sense as you have—and she don't play poker."

Tobe winced at mention of his daughter. Her name was Calla, but everybody called her Cal. Her hair was red and her eyes blue, and she had a few freckles, but she wasn't ugly by a whole lot. She had lived on a ranch all her life, could ride anything she could catch, and her tongue could burn worse than her quirt when she turned it loose. Tobe worshipped her, and was more afraid of her than of anything else on earth. His face fell at the boss's suggestion, and seeing how miserable he looked the old trail boss counted out \$1,000 and gave it to him.

"It must keep these card sharps at Dodge powerful busy, trimming all the fools that comes up the trail from Texas," he remarked.

Tobe made record time getting to the Sunflower. He didn't stop in the barroom, for he didn't drink. As he entered the gambling-room, two portly gentlemen, with diamonds in their scarfs, were sitting in a corner, talking.

"There comes a fish," said one of them. "I've trimmed him every year since I was a little boy."

"Mean the lanky gent, with his pants in his boots, a smile on his face, and one hand in his pocket?"

"That's him. He's looking for a game of draw poker. Won't play anything else, and its the easiest thing I ever trimmed, not excepting a tree without limbs."

"Huh! What's he worth?"

"Whatever he'll bet. I've seen him bluff on a shoe string, when all his pockets were inside out, lose, and dig up the money

somewhere. I got an idea he must be a big cowman and can raise all the money he wants to lose."

"May-be-so," drawled the other gambler, "but I like to see the kale on the table when I play."

"So do I, but if we get that sucker into a game, you'll be a bigger sucker than he is if you don't let him bet little pieces of paper, with his name and the amount on 'em. He ain't got no poker sense, but he'll pay."

"All right, he's your oyster. I'll hold the tools while you open him. Any little thing I can do, like parlor card tricks and the like?"

"Hell, no! It's got to be a square game. He's wise to every trick in the business, and he's game. He'd stand alone, with one gun, and call the United States army by its first name if it tried to put anything over on him. All you have to do is play poker. When you want to know what's in his hand, you can read it in his face and his happy brown eyes."

Half an hour later Tobe Candleless was as near heaven as he ever had been. He was seated at a poker table with three other punchers and the two gamblers. The ante was low enough to hurt nobody very much, but the sky was the limit on bets. On the very first deal Tobe got three aces. That wasn't so bad, but he'd been looking for a royal flush all his life. Only Tobe and the two gamblers stayed for 100 dollars each. Tobe drew two cards, and his face caved in as if his grandmother had died on the eve of a circus. The two gamblers drew one card each. Then the fun began. The gamblers began to cross lift on poor Tobe, and in three minutes his thousand was on the board.

"That's all the money I got with me," Tobe stammered.

"That's all right," said the big gambler who had engineered the deal. "I've played with you before and know you're square. Just write your name on pieces of paper and put the amount you want to bet on 'em. That's good enough for a game sport like you."

So the betting went on until there was \$21,000 on the table. Fourteen thousand had been put up by the two gamblers, \$1,000 by Tobe, and the other six were Tobe's paper. Cold sweat broke out on him. If he lost, he'd have to sell himself into slavery for the rest of his life. Then came the showdown. One of the gamblers had four queens, the other four kings, and Tobe had four aces!

"What the hell made you look so sad and doleful over them four aces?" asked the big gambler jocularly, thinking the game had just started.

"I—I reckon I was just sorty surprised," replied Tobe, as he pocketed his winnings and thoughtfully tore up the bits of paper. Then he pushed back his chair, and got up from the table.

"Hey! What kind of poker is that you play?" asked one of the gamblers. "Clean up the party and quit? Come on."

"Nope, I'm through," said Tobe.

"Ah, be a sport," said the other gambler. "I'll make you a side bet of a hundred that you win on the next hand."

"I wouldn't bet you a thin dime against a thousand dollars that a chigger couldn't eat a six-year-old red steer, horns, hoofs, and any, in five little minutes. I've quit!"

The gambler who set out to trim Tobe saw he had to take his medicine and laugh it off. But even in the hey-day of Dodge City gambling, \$7,000 was a considerable roll. The gentleman who was going to hold the tools

at the oyster opening was evidently from Central Missouri. Anyway, he had to be shown and shown hard. He let out a squeal about Tobe's betting paper and reached for his gun, which was impolite in the first place and dangerous besides. He didn't get half way to it until he was looking into the muzzle of Tobe's old .45.

"Steady as she lays, pardner," Tobe was saying, his soft, drawling voice having gone hard as flint. "Take yo' hand away from that gun—clean away from it. Now, you listen to me just one little minute. This was a square game, far as I know. You fellows invited me to play paper and I played it. If I'd lost, I'd have paid. You lost and you've paid. Anyway, it weren't no worse than bluffin' three of a kind with a pair of deuces, and both of you do that every day. Poker's been my savings bank for twenty years. I've drew out and aim to invest somewhere else."

With the other three punchers standing ready to mix into anything that was started, the gambler shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

"What!" said the old trail boss, when Tobe was back to camp within an hour of leaving it. "Cleaned up already?"

"Not quite," grinned Tobe. "I win a little pot, and I quit gamblin' for good and any."

"Quit! How much did you win?"

"I got fifteen thousand in my clothes. It's all paper, but it's the heaviest money I ever seen."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean them gents hate to give it up, and I don't know whether I can pack it out of town or not. They're apt to go to lookin' for two or three ways to get it off'n me."

"Oh, thataway. Well, now, the chuck wagon and me and ten of the boys aims to roll from here in about an hour. You just put that stuff in a *morral* and poke it down in the back corner of the wagon, then ride with us. If anybody gets it, he'll damn nigh know he's got it and won't have much use for it, either."

So Tobe's long-coveted pot rode home in the chuck wagon, and nobody tried to get it. Brownwood was a cowtown in those days, and it wasn't a week until everybody had heard about Tobe's remark about the chigger and the red steer. Among others, Dick Roby heard it. Dick's manner of making bread and butter was worse than poker, for he didn't give his victims the fun of playing for it, nor a sporting chance. He called Tobe into his office.

"Tobe, I understand you want to buy a ranch," he opened up. "I've got just what you need. This country in here ain't no cow country no more. The fire's been kept out, and it's growing up in brush. A lot of it's being fenced for farms, and cattle has got to go farther west."

"It do look like it," assented Tobe,

"It's just that way, too. Now, I got a ranch—eight sections deeded land, good ranch cabin. Plenty draws to shelter cattle in the winter, plenty water in the draws, except in a bad drought, and the best water hole in the plains country, one that never goes dry, on the land and within two miles of the cabin. Now, this place is a pick-up. I can sell it to you for a dollar an acre cash, and the whole world is open range out there."

"What would I want with that much deeded land if the whole world is open range?" asked Tobe, whose poker had taught him rapid mental calculations.

"That would be five thousand a hundred and twenty dollars. I wouldn't have enough left to buy cows. 'Sides that, they ain't a danged acre of that plains land worth a dollar. Where is this ranch, anyway?"

"It's in northwest of Buffalo Gap. Finest grass land in Texas. Tell you what I'll do. If you'll close the deal right now for cash, I'll let you have it for fifty cents an acre."

The deal was closed and a month later Tobe met his old trail boss in town and they took a drink together.

"Shore glad to see you, Boss. I'm aimin' to hit the trail tomorrow."

"What trail?"

"The trail to my ranch. I've bought me five hundred of the best young cows in Texas, and some good saddle stock, and—"

"Where is this ranch?"

"In northwest of Buffalo Gap. It ain't only a hundred and forty miles from a shipping point on the railroad, and—"

"No! You ain't been fool enough to buy a ranch in the plains country! Why, they ain't nobody out there but the biggest outfits in the world. You won't have a look-in. What's yo' brand going to be?"

"Ace of Spades. That's the card I drew to my other three aces that day at Dodge, and she's a winner."

"They'll have one hell of a time runnin' anything over your brand, but —looks to me like you're bettin' on that chigger after all."

"Nothin' like that, Boss. When I say I'll do a thing, I mean to do it. I told Em and the baby I was done gambling, and I am. They're tickled to death and ready to ride."

"You may think you've quit, but

you ain't. You're making the biggest gamble of yo' life. Them big outfits out there has got a plumb army of men. They won't ask a little feller what he wants to do; they tell him what he's got to do. Them counties out there ain't organized, and they ain't no law. How many men you got?"

"Only but two, but they're good ones. You know 'em. Pink Taylor and Brazos Jones. We ain't got but five hundred cows, and me and Pink and Brazos can put them many cattle to bed every night, put hot rocks to they feet, and sing by-low to 'em."

"Ain't three better cowhands in Texas than you and them two, but I can smell a heap of hell in the offing."

"You always had a pretty good nose for trouble, Boss," laughed Tobe. "I'm backin' the Ace of Spades to win and she's goin' to win big and hearty."

They took another drink, shook hands, and parted. As Tobe walked off, the old trail boss shook his head.

"Pore old Tobe," he muttered. "I said one time that outside his cow sense he didn't know as much as a road runner. Why, he ain't got as much sense as *two* road runners and a locoed braunk. Why them big outfits like the J back to J—they call it the 'Jayback' outfit—they'll just eat Tobe like a turkey do a grass-hopper. He won't take a thing off'n nobody, and unless Cal drags him from under it he'll homicide hisself again' some fellow's gun inside a year. I'm shore sorry about that, too. Tobe's a good feller, and the best cowhand that ever forked a braunk. Says he ain't gamblin' no more. All I got to say is that he's doublin' his bet on that dang chigger and ain't got no more sense than to think it can eat a steer."

Two weeks from that day Tobe turned loose on his own range 500 as good cows as there were in the state. The grass and the country were better than he had hoped to find them.

"They'll never stop the Ace of Spades now," said Tobe happily to Brazos Jones as they unloaded the meager equipment from trail wagons at the ranch cabin.

Tobe had selected no cheap, green hands to help him in his venture. Pink Taylor was fifty, red-haired, and rusty from exposure to the weather. Old Brazos was apparently too old to figure on. His hair had reached iron-gray and stopped. It refused to turn white. His face was brown as a Mexican's, and he looked like a bronze statue of silence—and usually acted like one.

"It may not start," he observed. "If it don't, it'll be already stopped."

"Oh, it'll start. Never saw finer grass or better country to work cattle in."

"Yes, grass is good, and they's plenty of country. Too much country. It's easier to ketch a braunk in a corral than it is in a thousand-acre trap."

There had been abundant rain that year. The winter range was never finer, and no late northers came to draw the cattle just before spring time. Tobe and his two veteran *vagueros* watched over the 500 cows. They also found time to build pens, haul wire 140 miles and build a horse trap, put up a shack for the men, and lay the foundation for a real ranch.

Came spring and they had a little roundup of their own. Cal rode with the men and every one of the 500 cows was accounted for.

"That's the best showin' I ever seen a bunch of cows make in my life," Tobe said, when they had marked and branded the calves and set the cattle loose. "Only

lost nine cows, and every one that ain't got a calf has got two calves. Tell me the Ace of Spades ain't goin' to win and win big!"

"I seen a fellow holding three aces get bluffed out of a big pot one time by a fellow that didn't have nothin' but a pair of deuces—and a gun," said Brazos.

"If you did, it wasn't you that helt the three aces," laughed Tobe. "I'd like to view the remains of the gent that bluffed you out'n something."

In those days, Tobe Candless was the happiest man in Texas. Mrs. Candless and Calla were so glad Tobe had quit gambling that they were willing to do anything. They dug in, out there on the edge of the world, where they didn't see another woman for six months on a stretch, and got ready to do their part. They had said they were willing to do anything if Tobe would only quit gambling, and they were doing it without a murmur. They hadn't realized, yet, that there were other ways of gambling than playing poker. They were going to learn, going to find out that the Ace of Spades would have to hedge its bets or lose the game.

But Tobe was happy. Grass had come, "plumb copious and reg'lar," wild flowers had blossomed, and everything was lovely. True, it hadn't rained a drop since that little wet norther in February, but it generally rained in May, and it was May now. He'd seen heavy lightning in the northeast. Ought to rain pretty soon. So, still backing his Ace of Spades to win, Tobe went on being happy.

The first thing to indicate that Tobe wouldn't better his hand on the draw happened about that time at the Jayback ranch, whose headquarters lay thirty miles north of the Ace of Spades. Trent Gilliam, a handsome, black-haired, brown-eyed

puncher, rode in and went to the foreman's office. "I found something today, Ross," he said to gruff old Ross Bilby, the foreman.

"Silver spur that the Spaniards lose, when Cortez conquered Texas, or just a arrowhead?" growled Ross. "Let's see it."

"I ain't got it in my pocket," grinned Trent, "but it's a pocket outfit."

"What is it?"

"The Ace of Spades ranch."

"What!"

"Ace of Spades, I said. That's the brand. It's a pretty one, too. Looks fine on a cow, and they's right smart cows and calves there. The calves gambols and frisks about, and it looks to me like the fellow that owns 'em is gambling some, too."

"Shut up your damn foolishness and tell me where this outfit is."

"At the old ranch cabin in on the draws, just south of the Agua Fresca water hole."

"What! I've got one hell of a fine lot of riders. How come a outfit can squat right here at my door and raise a family of calves, and none of my men find it out and report it?"

"Search me. I been on the north line all winter. First time I've rid in that direction for a year or more."

"Did you see anybody?"

"No, but I saw the place. They've built another room or two to the house and put up a shack for the men. Got good pens, and looks like they aim to stay."

"Huh! They may aim to, but they won't. The Jayback needs that range. Specially she needs that water. That outfit is due to move."

"When?"

"When I get ready. Find out how many men they got, but don't let 'em know you're spyin' on 'em."

So the age-old fighting over a water hole began. Men have been fighting over water holes ever since Abraham and Lot divided their herd and Lot built a ranch cabin and some pens over on the Clear Fork of the Jordan—and that was back a ways. But this was another kind of fight. The Ace of Spades figured in it, and that called for a fresh deck and a new deal. Tobe Candles didn't know it, but he was "betting on the chigger." That was about the relation the Ace of Spades bore to the Jayback.

Tobe watched the lightning in the northeast. He knew as well as anyone that rain didn't come from that way. Several good clouds came up from the northwest and west, the thundering and lightning were terrific, but only a sprinkle of rain fell. Then along about the last of June the heavens turned to brass, and the rain god called it a day and sat down. In a word, it was getting a bit dry. Old Brazos Jones came in one day from the deep draws that lay northwest of the Ace of Spades. He got a drink of water and rolled a smoke.

"How's things lookin', Brazos?"

"Like Monday morning after havin' a hell of a time Saturday and Sunday and all last week."

"How come?"

"All the water in the draws is dry; the cows is suckin' mud, and the calves is all flat in the flanks and round-eyed."

"That's pretty bad," said Tobe, "but they's lots of dead grass and some brush in the head of the draws. A cow brute

can live a long time on a little dead grass, a few green leaves, and a bone to chew if its got plenty water."

"I know that as well as you do."

"All right, we'll just ride out in the morning, all hands, and push our cows and calves up to Agua Fresca water hole. They's water enough there to run 'em a year. Seems like they's sorty springs in it. I was there last week, and it hadn't fell a bit."

"Yes, they's right smart water there," said Brazos, "but—"

"But what?"

"Hate to tell you, Tobe, but the Jayback outfit is drifting enough cattle down to that water hole to drink it to a butterfly puddle in three days."

"What! The Jayback outfit! Why, that water hole belongs to me. It's on my deed land. They can't drink my water up."

"No, I reck'n not, but their cattle can and will if they get to it."

"Where's their herd?"

"They ain't driving 'em, they're just drifting 'em this way. I figger they get to the water tomorrow sometime. I rid up that way about twenty miles today. I didn't see any riders, but I see plenty more cattle than would be on the range if somebody wasn't working 'em."

Tobe was thoughtful for a long time. "Now, see here, Brazos, I never wanted anything but what's fair and right in my life," he said finally. "It ain't neither fair nor right for a big outfit, with thousands of cattle and plenty able to drive to grass and water, to drift their stock in here and just naturally drink the Ace of Spades clean out of the game. They ain't nothing in the rules that allows that."

"They got the full house, and we got the pair of deuces, and—"

"And a gun," finished Tobe. "I don't want no gun stuff. We hold the Ace of Spades, and she's a lucky card. I aim to stay in and see what I git in the draw."

"All right, Tobe, you're the boss. Maybe you can make a dicker and sell to 'em."

"No! I don't want to sell. It'll rain again, sometime—it always has. This is good cow country, the ranch belongs to me, and I aim to stay on it if you and Pink'll stay with me."

"Oh, I'll stay with you if them damned Jaybacks don't bury us in different places."

"If they bury me, they'll have the damndest, fanciest funeral they ever attends," snapped Tobe, his brown eyes snapping fire.

The Ace of Spades outfit rode before daylight the next morning. There were four riders—Tobe Candleless, Cal, and the two hard-faced old *vagueros*. Their cattle were gentle from being ridden among every day and salted regularly. It was no trouble to drift them out of the draws and on north to the big water hole. Long before noon they had filled up on good, clean water and were grazing on the dead grass to the east of Agua Fresca.

"They's plenty water here to keep them many cattle until the fall rains come," said Tobe as the four sat their horses at the water hole.

"Yes, for them many," growled Brazos, "but look yonder."

Off to the northwest, and not more than a mile away, was a great herd, pointed straight for Agua Fresca.

"They ain't drifting now," went on Brazos. "Somebody's driving 'em."

"Let's go," said Tobe. "If they get a little closer to this water, all hell can't

turn 'em," and, driving in his spurs, he tore off toward the head of that herd.

They topped a rise and could see the head of the herd half a mile away. Nobody was riding point. They didn't need pointers. Their noses would do the pointing. Far back in the long line of cattle, which Brazos estimated at 10,000, men were riding and pushing them on. Tobe spoke rapidly. "The wind's coming out of the northwest, what little there is. They ain't got the scent of this water. If we can bend 'em west a little, until they smell the sipe springs and soft mud in the draws, they'll go in there. We've got to work fast. Let's go."

The first news the Jaybackers had that anything was wrong was when they saw four riders bending the heads of their herd to the west. The leaders got the scent of sipe springs and mud. Up went their heads and tails, and a wild stampede started for those draws. The Ace of Spades riders drew back toward Agua Fresca and stood watching that storm sweep by. Vainly the Jaybackers rode in to try to break that stream and turn at least part of that herd toward the water hole. As well try to stem a torrent with a cobweb. Ten thousand cattle went thundering into the draws. Hundreds fell and were trampled to death, while thousands sought water in a place where there was not a drink for fifty.

"Maybe we don't hold nothin' but deuces, but we're still in the game," said Tobe.

"Yes, and we're goin' to get our hand called," growled Brazos.

Six riders came storming across the prairie, straight to where the four sat their horses, and reined up within fifty feet of them.

"What the hell you mean, turning them cattle into the draws!" roared Ross Bilby.

"Just protectin' my water," replied Tobe.

"Your water?"

"Yes, it's on my land."

"Your land! Who the hell owns any land out here? It's all wide open outdoors and don't belong to nobody but Godamighty."

"I own some. I got eight sections here. The Spaniards taken it in the name of God and the King of Spain, Texas taken it away from Mexico, and I got a patent from Texas. A title like that ought to hold in any court."

"Court, hell! They ain't no courts, nor no law, in this country. If I thought you damn nesters knew what you was doin' when you turned that herd, I'd—"

"Just one little minute," interrupted Tobe. "I can hear you without you yellin', and I can understand without you cussin' so much. I reck'n you're the foreman of the Jayback outfit. My name's Tobe Candles."

"Yes, I'm foreman. My name's Ross Bilby, and you'll be damn sorry you met me before this thing's over with."

"I'm already sorry, but that don't help matters any. The point is this. I think as much of cows as any man in the world. I hated to see that herd go into the roughs, but—"

"What'd you turn 'em in there for, then?"

"I told you once: to protect my water. Now you listen to me. I'll make you a fair proposition. I'll—"

"I ain't buyin' out no damn nester outfits, so get that out of yo' head."

"You can't find enough money in Texas to buy me out," returned Tobe.

"My proposition is this. They ain't enough water here to keep that big herd ten days, but they's enough here to keep my little bunch until the fall rains come. If you'll agree to drive yo' herd to water, I'll push my cows back out of the way. Then I'll help you get yo' herd back here and fill 'em up good. Then I'll help you start 'em. That's fair and right."

"It may look fair and right to you," snarled Bilby, "but I don't figger to deal that way. What do you aim to do if I don't agree to that?"

"I don't know. I'll just have to do it as it comes up to be did."

"Oh, you will. Well, now, you've talked so high and mighty about what's right, I'll tell you what's goin' to happen, and that's more important. They's been a few damn nester outfits tried to tell me where to head in before. I'm goin' to bring that herd back here and let 'em drink this hole dry, so's the birds can feast on fish for a week, and you can drive your dinky little milk bunch to grass and water along with other people."

"I wish you wouldn't start anything like that, Mr. Bilby," said Tobe. "They's plenty trouble in the world without starting a trouble mill."

"It won't be no trouble to me," sneered Ross Bilby. "I got forty men and plenty horses." Then Bilby let loose a string of abuse.

His purpose was to anger the Ace of Spades riders until they drew their guns, but it didn't work. Nobody would draw until they saw Tobe go after his gun, and he sat like a rock.

Cal hadn't said a word until that time, but she could stand it no longer. "You're a gang of dirty water rustlers!" she flung at them. "A cattle rustler is

bad enough but a water rustler is lower than that. You'd steal water from a blind goat, you dirty scum. A decent cow-puncher wouldn't camp on the same creek with you."

Now, to do the Jaybackers justice, they didn't know it was a woman talking. Cal had a contralto voice and they thought she was a pert boy, about grown, wanting to show off a bit. Two of them reached for their guns.

Up went Tobe's hand. "Hush, Cal," he commanded, and then to the Jaybackers, he said, "Boys, don't do that, please. Things is bad enough in this country as she lays, without a lot of killin'."

The Jaybackers got an idea Tobe was afraid and trying to beg off. They put their hands to their guns, and the foreman proceeded to pour out a torrent of abuse. He stopped to get his breath, and Cal broke out again:

"Oh, shut up—you don't do anything but talk. Why don't you make a break? Six against four, and you ain't got the nerve to draw."

That helped their nerve. Two guns were jerked clear of their holsters, and then Bilby and his men got the surprise of their lives. Never had they seen four guns get in action with such amazing swiftness. Four of them were hit in the first volley. They drew and fired, but the surprise had rendered their aim bad. They whirled and fled. One of their men fell from his horse just out of pistol range. Two others got down, put him back on his horse, and rode away, one on each side of him.

Bilby glanced back and saw that all the Ace of Spades riders still sat their horses, but had holstered their pistols and had drawn carbines from their

saddle scabbards. "Gun slingers, eh!" he snarled. "Well, damn 'em, I'll get an outfit that can play with 'em."

Tobe and his riders sat watching them as they rode away. Four of them, the four that were hit, took the back trail toward the Jayback ranch. Ross Bilby and the other man followed the way the big herd went.

"Well, we trimmed 'em down a little nearer to our size," grinned Pink Taylor.

"Yes, but they'll come fixed to eat lead and sling it too next time," growled old Brazos Jones. "That foreman is as rough as a chapped lip."

While they were talking, Tobe sat his horse in deep thought. He seemed to be making a calculation. "Boys, a pen a hundred and fifty yards wide by two hundred and fifty long would take this water hole in," he said, at last. "I got a right to fence a horse trap on my land. I got a right to fence all my land, if I want to. Why ain't I got a right to fence my water?"

"You have, I reck'n," said Brazos, "if you don't get killed while you're doing it, but I don't see how you're goin' to keep it fenced when it's done. These fellers out here hates barb' wire worse than a woman hates company to dinner on wash day."

"I don't do but one thing at a time," said Tobe. "I can't keep it fenced until I get it fenced. It's only about a mile from here to that stack of posts and wire that we hauled out to build a big horse trap. I aim to make camp here, anyway, until this mess is over, and we might as well be building fence. This water is for my little aces, and I aim for 'em to drink it."

"If you build that fence, Tobe, them fellers'll cut it," said Brazos.

"Let 'em cut it. Point is, will you fellows help me build it?"

"Shore! Anything you say goes."

Ross Bilby had a piece of work in hand, himself. What was left of the herd, after about a thousand were killed in the "run," drifted on down the draws to an old water hole where there was still mud and a little muddy water. The old water hole was about ten miles from Agua Fresca. Hundreds of the Jayback cattle were bogged in it and had to be literally dragged out. It took three days of killing work to get the herd together and work them back onto the prairie, west of the draws. By that time Ross Bilby was a raving maniac and ready to kill every nester in the world. So that third day promised trouble, for Ross was drifting his herd right up the ridge to Agua Fresca water hole. He'd show that damn nester a few things.

Meantime, a few things had happened at the water hole. Around it had sprung up a nine-wire fence that would turn anything but an elephant, and would stop even it. Midway on the west side of the enclosure, on the outside and fifteen feet from the fence, stood Tobe's big freight wagon, piled high with left-over fence posts. The space under the wagon was blocked with posts. At each end of the fifteen-by-twenty-foot space between the wagon and the fence a six-foot palisade fence had been built. Inside this little enclosure, which was a fair impromptu fort, Tobe had his camp, all provisioned for an indefinite stay. Cal had been with them all the time. She couldn't dig post holes, but she could, and did, watch while the others worked.

"I wonder where that herd went,"

said Brazos, as they stood surveying their finished work.

"I don't know," replied Tobe thoughtfully, "but I know they ain't enough water inside of a hundred miles the way they went for a horned toad to live on twenty minutes. We better get our little aces in here now, and water 'em good. We're liable to have company any time."

The Ace of Spades cattle were just over a little ridge east of the water hole. Cal's horse was unsaddled and inside the big enclosure, grazing on the green stuff along the edge of the water. With an admonition to Cal to keep her eyes open, Tobe and his men rode on after the cattle.

Now Cal had been watching all morning, but there were things she hadn't seen. One of them was a man in the head of a little draw, looking at the water hole through a glass. The man was Trent Gilliam, who was a nephew of the owner of the ranch and had been punching cattle to learn the cattle business. There were a lot of things about it that didn't just meet Trent's approval, but he was under the orders of Ross Bilby and did as he was told to do. He had been the one who had first discovered the Ace of Spades, so Bilby had sent him up there to spy on the waterhole. Ross was holding the herd, and waiting for Trent to report. He didn't want that herd to run again. A little while before noon Trent rode up and reported that the water hole was fenced.

"Why, damn their fool souls, don't they know we'll cut the fence? One man can cut it in ten minutes, and one man can cut it better than a dozen. Get a pair of wire snippers, Trent, and go on back. Them fellows have been working nights. They won't expect us

to do anything in the daytime. They'll go home and get something to eat and sleep a while, now they've finished; then they'll come back tonight. Watch 'em, and as soon as they're out of sight cut hell out of the fence. I got to water these cows."

"If you'd taken that fellow up on his proposition you said he made," replied Trent, "you could have the cattle all filled up and well on the way to plenty water and—"

"The hell I could!" snapped Ross Bilby. "I'll ramrod this outfit for a while yet. You do what you're told. Take a man with you. As soon as those fellows leave, send the man back to tell us so we can turn the cattle loose. Then you cut that wire, and cut it good."

"Oh, all right. You're boss."

"You know damn well I'm boss, and that nester outfit'll know it before I get through with 'em."

So it happened that Trent Gilliam got back to his post in the head of the draw just in time to see Tobe and his men ride way to drive in their own cattle, and there was no one else in sight. Now there was something about that water hole that Trent didn't know. That was that on the west side of it, where the wagon stood, the bank was high and steep. Between that high bank and the water was a low strip of land fifty feet wide. Cal's horse was concealed inside the enclosure, and under the bank. So, when Tobe and his two punchers passed over the ridge to get the cows, there was not even a horse in sight. The wagon team had been taken home. Trent sent his man back with the message and, mounting his horse, rode hard for that fence. He had orders to cut it, and cut it he would, though if he'd had his way he'd have

accepted Tobe's offer three days before.

Trent reached the fence and slipped from his horse. He saw the wagonload of posts and the short palisade at the end of it, but he didn't take time to examine it as closely as he should have. He was in a hurry, for this was a lonesome place for one man. He had cut wire before, so he stooped down to cut the bottom wire first. He had just put the snippers on the wire, and was ready to squeeze the handle, when—*Crack!* A gun flashed, and the pliers flew out of his hand, giving it a tingling jar.

"Put 'em up over your head and lock 'em together," came a boyish voice from behind the palisades. "Now, walk this way until I tell you to stop."

Trent was about halfway between the wagons and the southwest corner of the enclosure. He was within twenty feet of those palisades when halted.

"Turn your back this way. Let your right hand down, pull your gun, and drop it on the ground. That's it. Don't make any mistake, for I can get you too easy from here. Now, climb on the wagon and come in here."

When Trent was inside the crude fort he was told to turn his back, and a leather horn-string was looped around his right wrist and pulled behind him. Then he was ordered to pull the left one back. In a moment he was securely bound. Trent was humiliated. To be taken prisoner in that silly manner by anybody was bad enough, but to be taken by a boy was too much, and he let out a string of oaths and told his captor to have his fun quick for the Jaybackers would be there pronto.

"All right, you can sit down and rest until they come," Cal told him, and

then he jumped as three quick shots were fired.

"Why—why, you're a girl!" he stammered, facing about.

"Yes, I've been a girl all the time, but it don't seem to make any difference to Jaybackers. They ain't got no manners."

Trent went red and sat down. "Now, see here, young lady; don't get me wrong," he said, "I belong to the Jayback outfit, but I never spoke a disrespectful word in the presence of a woman in my life—if I knew it. I thought you were a boy, and I apologize."

"All right, I'll excuse you. Better sit down. You're apt to get hurt if anything starts."

The answer to those three shots was on the way. The Ace of Spades cattle came storming down the slope, through the wide gate, and on to the water. Tobe and his men could see no one. They brought their horses inside and closed and stapled the stout wire gate. They saw Calla leaning calmly on the wire fence, looking at them. Riding around to the west side, they stopped under the bank.

"What's the signal about?" Tobe called up to Calla.

"Got company, and he says we're going to have some more."

The explanation was soon made. The three men climbed into the improvised fort and looked the prisoner over.

"What's your outfit going to do?" asked Tobe.

"Try to water their cattle here. They sent me on to cut the wire, but—I didn't cut it."

"I see you didn't," replied Tobe dryly, "and I'm right glad you didn't, but I'm shore sorry this fellow Bilby

won't be reasonable. I hate to see cows killed, and—"

"Killed! You don't aim to kill cattle?"

"Only enough to make a wall around this fence that they can't get over. The fence will turn the first ones that strike it, but when they begin to crowd in it won't last as long as a butterfly in hell."

"But, man, that's terrible."

"Yes, this whole mess is right terrible, but I didn't bring it on. I told Bilby I aimed to protect my water."

Trent Gilliam fell silent. He was trying to think of some solution of the problem. There by the side of the wagon stood a slender girl who seemed to think no more of a coming gunfight than if she were going to a party. Trent had been at the ranch two years, but there had been no very rough stuff. The range had been good, and there had been nothing to quarrel about.

"Mr. Candless, maybe I can stop this thing," he said presently. "I'll give you my word of honor that, if you'll turn me loose, I'll do my best to talk some sense into old Ross Bilby's head."

"I don't mind turning you loose, but nobody can tell Bilby anything. He has to be shown, and we'll have to— Good God! Jump over there and get his saddle and gun quick, Pink. Turn him loose, Cal. I wouldn't chain the devil in a mess like this is goin' to be."

Pink Taylor tossed Trent's saddle over the palisades and climbed into the fort with the young man's gun in his hand.

"Talk about betting on the chigger," he growled to Brazos, as he reached the ground. "We ain't got as much chance as a one-eyed weevil to eat the world's

corn crop. Crawl up here and look what's comin' after us."

As they climbed up by the side of Tobe Candless, Cal was untying the tightly knotted leather thong from Trent Gilliam's wrists. He had learned from hearing them talk that Cal was Tobe's daughter.

"I'll give you my parole, Miss Candless," he offered.

"I don't want yo' pay roll," snapped Cal. "Money won't buy you a thing. If you start anything when you're loose, you'll get shot apart, that's all."

Trent grinned at that, but his grin vanished instantly. The three men sprang down from the wagon and filled their jumper pockets with cartridges from a grain sack that had a peck of them in it. Then they picked up their rifles and climbed back on top of the load of posts, Cal climbing up with them, leaving Trent alone and unarmed on the ground.

"Our only chance is to kill enough of 'em right here in front of the wagon to make a wall they can't climb," said Tobe grimly. "I shore hate it, but it won't be no more than would be killed goin' over that bank if we wasn't here."

"I've seen boogers," said Pink Taylor, "but they was all babies. This one is the old he-booger of the world."

"You won't be able to hear nothin' in another minute," said Tobe. "Just do yo' dangdest and trust to luck. We'll— Why, the dang fools! Look at 'em. What are they trying to do? Ain't they got no more cow sense than that?"

"Can I come up there?" called Trent Gilliam.

"Shore! Come on. Here's yo' gun, and if you ever want to see your happy home again, try to see how many Jayback cows you can kill in ten seconds, for that's

how long the betting lasts. After that somebody gets called."

Trent felt the earth tremble as he took his foot from the ground to climb onto the wagon. As his head came above the posts he saw a sight that would live in his memory always. Coming across the prairie, straight for the water hole, was the big Jayback herd. It had broken sidewise and was half a mile wide. In front of it rode Ross Bilby and twenty men, trying vainly to break it and ease it to the water hole, for Ross Bilby had plenty of cow sense when he wasn't crazed with anger. He knew what would happen when the cattle went over it. What he didn't know was that the fence had never been cut.

On came the thundering herd. They were within 400 yards of the water hole when the Jayback riders gave up the fight and, turning, fled before them. The horsemen divided, part of them going around the upper end of the enclosure and part around the lower end, and meeting on higher ground beyond for safety from that juggernaut of cattle. When they looked back, they saw something they hadn't noticed in their mad scramble for safety. Five men stood on top of that load of posts, and five guns were pouring leaden death into the head of the herd.

Almost within Tobe's promised ten seconds, there was a wall of dead cattle in front and to the sides of the wagon that the crazy herd couldn't climb, and the guns turned and began dropping them along the fence on either side of the wagon. The big herd split and went pouring around the ends of the enclosure. The force of their onslaught was broken. The fence would hold them now. They had completely surrounded

the little enclosure and stood bawling in sight of the water they couldn't reach.

"God! That's awful!" muttered Tobe. "I hate to see it, but I'm backing my little Ace of Spades."

The noise of the pushing, thirst-mad, bawling cattle was deafening. If Ross Bilby and his men wanted to do anything, they were powerless for the moment. The little party at the wagon had a living wall of cattle all around them now.

"That wire ain't been cut," Bilby said, as he sat his horse among his men and far enough away to be heard by yelling at the top of his voice. "What the hell went with Trent, anyway?"

"He's with the Ace of Spades outfit. I seen him pouring lead into the Jayback cows, same as the rest of 'em."

"Hell you did! If I ever get my hands on him he won't pour no more lead into nothin'! We got to cut that fence and water them cows before they all die. All we have to do is to breach it in a few places on this side, and the cattle'll do the rest. That damn' nester has got his little milk bunch inside. They won't be enough of 'em left when this mess is over to say soo-cow to. From here on, I'll give a dollar apiece for Aces. Just kill the cow, cut out the Ace, and bring it to me. I'll give you the dollar. He'll buck the Jayback outfit, will he? Well, damn him, let him buck. He's won a coupla little skirmishes, but the big fight ain't started yet. Now what the hell are they doin'?"

"Getting ready for just what you propose to do," said one of Bilby's men. "They got us up a tree. We've got six-shooters, and they got rifles. They got all the water in the world, and we've got none."

"We'll have plenty water in a little while," snarled Bilby.

"We won't need any water if we try to get it," replied the puncher.

Meantime, the little fort had changed front. Posts were dragged from under the wagon where they were no longer needed; there was a solid wall of dead cattle in front of the wagon now. The posts were leaned against the top wire of the fence in a solid wall as a protection against any bullets that might come across the water hole. The enclosure thus made was about fifteen by twenty feet. There was an emergency camp kit and plenty of food in it. Pink Taylor climbed the fence and brought a few buckets of water, while Bilby, well out of possible range, cursed impotently and finally pulled his gun and fired a few shots. The bullets fell in the water and Pink waved his hat at them.

"Well," said a Jayback puncher who was a bit of a bully, "we ain't getting anywhere. We're just giving 'em time to get ready for us. Give me a pair of pliers, and I'll work through the cattle and cut the dang fence in one place."

"Yes, you will," said the cautious rider who had first called attention to what they were up against. "You'll get shot."

"Shot at, you mean. I been shot at before. The bullet ain't been made yet to kill me. Gimme them pliers and let's go. I'm dry."

Inside Tobe's fort all was quiet, but the defenders of that forlorn hope, the men who were still "betting on the chigger" and on Pink Taylor's "one-eyed weevil," were running greasy rags through their hot rifles and cleaning their six-shooters.

The puncher worked his way through

the milling mass of cattle. He was game, all right, if he did bluster. Not many men would have undertaken that stunt. The others watched him.

"That pen's about a hundred and fifty by two hundred and fifty yards," the cautious level-headed puncher said. "They ain't a spot in the fence that's more than two hundred yards from the fellows, and—"

"Two hundred yards is a hell of a long shot," growled Ross Bilby.

"For a six-shooter, yes. For a rifle, no. If Bill ever makes it to that fence, you'll see."

"He's makin' it all right, and he'll cut it."

"Get his braunk, Brazos," said Tobe. "We don't want to kill no men, unless they crowd us, and that chap ain't crowdin' us much."

Bill Bridgeman was within twenty feet of the fence. Old Brazos was kneeling on the ground, his rifle poked through a crack in the posts and lying on a wire of the fence. The gun cracked and Bill's horse dropped like a wet blanket, with a bullet center in the white star in its forehead. Tobe had said he didn't want to kill any men, but setting one afoot in the midst of that milling herd of crazy cattle was the next thing to it. If Bill hadn't been a bulldogger, that would have been the last of him. Like a flash, he grabbed a big steer in the jam and went to its back, raking it with his spurs as he landed. The steer, headed away from the fence, went tearing through the herd into the open, where Bill bulldogged it and dismounted.

"That's a right warm place in there, and I'm afoot," said Bill, as he approached

the group of Jayback riders. "It's somebody else's time now."

"I'll tell you what," said Bilby. "They ain't only four of 'em in there. I don't reck'n Trent's damn fool enough to fire on us, and he ain't got no rifle, anyway. Eight of you work in. You've all got cutters in yo' saddle pockets. Two of you go to the corners, farthest away from 'em, and the others just scatter along this side. They don't aim to kill nobody, and four of 'em can't get all of us. Come on. I'll be one of the eight. Let's all get to the fence at once."

They scattered out and moved into the herd. The sun was getting low and square in their faces as they rode into the mass of cattle.

"The baby's goin' to be born now," said Pink Taylor, as he snuggled his gun to his shoulder and waited. "Them fellers has got nerve all right."

The eight gained the fence at the same time. Also, four rifles roared as one, and four horses went down. They roared again and the other four went down. The men were not all bulldoggers, and among those who were not was Ross Bilby. Some of them won clear but only by the help of their comrades were Bilby and two others saved.

"You played hell that pass," growled the cautious puncher. "Half the outfit is afoot now and their saddles gone."

"Well, there's ten more men at camp," snapped Bilby. "One of you boys ride in and get 'em, and bring some fresh braunks for the rest of us."

"Yes," jeered Bill Bridgeman, "and tell 'em to bring along a lot of fresh saddles, too. Our'n ain't goin' to be right fresh and clean by the time them cattle messes over 'em."

White with rage, Ross Bilby cursed

him roundly and informed him that the business was no joke.

"She shore ain't no minstrel show," grinned Bill. "I wouldn't wonder if she gets serious as a pair of deuces, and everything in the pot, 'bout tomorrow morning."

"We'll cut that fence before then."

"All right. Us infantry can't do nothin' in a charge like that. We'll just sit down on the ground. You mounted gents ride herd on us and keep the cows and things off'n us."

One or two others joined in the hurrah, and Bilby knew they were poking fun at him. He knew, too, that a little more of that would ruin his chance of winning the fight. It had to be stopped, and he went about it wrong, as he had gone about a lot of other things. He cursed the men out and stopped the joking all right, but he killed their spirit of co-operation.

At sunset nine men sat calmly on the ground, waiting for horses, while eleven, all tired, hungry, and thirsty, sat their horses. These men were all loyal to the Jayback outfit. They were men who would stay with their herd no matter where it went, but there was a limit and they had about reached it. They all knew the proposition that Tobe Candless had made about watering the cattle and helping to start them away from there, and they were all thinking about it now. That would have saved a lot of trouble, and incidentally would have saved the owner of the Jayback a good many cattle.

In Tobe's fort a fire had been kindled, coffee made, and meat broiled. Cal hadn't spoken for an hour. When supper was over they sat around, smoking, while one watched from the top of the wagon.

They knew half of the Jaybackers were afoot. They had seen the lone rider leave and knew he had gone for more horses and reinforcements. There would be nothing more attempted until these reinforcements came, but there was no encouragement for the Ace of Spades. One of those big outfits that the old trail boss had mentioned was preparing to eat the Ace of Spades like a turkey would a grasshopper.

"Well, boys, we'll be able to see what happens—just before it happens," Tobe said as the full moon came up. "They can't—" There was a sob from the corner of the little enclosure, and Tobe whirled toward it. "Why, baby, what's the matter?" he cried in alarm.

"Mo-mother's there at the ranch by herself, and—and some of these Jaybacker savages might bu—burn the house, and—"

"They wouldn't hardly do that, I reckon," said Tobe slowly.

"No, Miss Candleless," said Trent Gilliam. "Those fellows are rough, but there's not a man among them that would offer any disrespect to a woman. There's not one that wouldn't shoot a man in a minute if he suggested such a thing. This fight is right here at the water hole. I'm sorry, but—"

The fact of the matter was that in spite of all her nerve and her gun-slitting, Cal was very much a woman, and she had reached the limit of her endurance. She didn't have any business in that armed camp, but she was there and couldn't get away. As long as the excitement had kept up, she had been all right, but now that the matter had settled down to a night of watching and waiting, she began to think and went all to pieces.

The hours dragged on. The full moon made it light as day almost. A ring of the stronger cattle still pressed against the wire fence, sniffing the water. Beyond them, thousands that were weak and almost dead had bedded. Out there, on a little rise to the east of the water hole, nine men still sat on the ground. They were hungry and thirsty, but some of them slept a little. It would be impossible for one of them to get away from the group without being seen by the watchful eyes in the Ace of Spades camp.

After his assurance that the Jaybackers were not disturbers of women, Trent Gilliam went over and sat down near Cal. Old Tobe Candleless could hear the low drone of their voices for hours afterward, as he sat on top of the wagon, watching and listening.

He saw the men come from the Jayback camp and join the group out there on the prairie, and woke Pink and Brazos, who had been getting a little sleep. They redoubled their vigilance, but the Jaybackers made no move. The Jaybackers were too far away for what they were saying to be heard, but occasionally Tobe caught a few words. There seemed to be an argument going on. It was well after midnight when Bilby's reinforcements reached the scene of the battle. Their powwow lasted until daybreak, and during those hours all hands in the little Ace of Spades fort kept watch.

The smell of blood from the slain cattle and the scent of thousands of living animals was almost unbearable. It would have been, except that a strong breeze was blowing from the east and blew it away from them.

Pink Taylor was a hopeful, optimistic soul. "The wind's been in the east two

days," he said, toward morning. "When it blows from the east three days in succession it brings rain in any country on earth where it ever rains."

"Yes, but it only blows from the east one day, or maybe two, at a time in this country," growled Brazos. "It gets discouraged and then quits."

"Well, don't talk about it thataway. No use trying to discourage— Look out, Tobe; they're fixin' to rise and fly," and he pointed to a stirring among Bilby's men now plainly seen in the coming daylight..

Only one of them mounted, however, and he rode around the cattle, as if to come up in the rear of the little fort.

What had happened to the Jaybackers would have amounted to mutiny on the high seas, considering Ross Bilby as skipper of the craft. As soon as his reinforcements arrived, Bilby was strong for cutting the fence. He insisted that Tobe's men couldn't shoot with sufficient accuracy in the moonlight to get the men or their horses. Several of the men expressed doubt and Ross went wild. He abused them and called them a gang of quitters.

"Now, see here, Ross," said the cautious puncher, who had been trying to get the foreman to use his head, "you're boss of the outfit, all right, but you've gone crazy over one idea. You've already got more than a thousand cattle killed in these two runs, and—"

"Damn the cattle!" stormed Ross. "I don't aim to have no damn nester outfit—"

"That's what you're crazy about. You've not only lost them many cattle, but you got nine saddle horses killed, and if you keep on you'll get some more killed, and some men with 'em. You

can't win this fight the way you're goin' at it, and—"

"Hell we can't win it! I got thirty men, here, and they ain't only but four of them. Why, we can eat them."

"We ain't been eatin' 'em, and most of us is hungry for a different sort of rations. Now I propose that we go to this fellow Candless and accept his offer to let us water the cattle and get 'em away from here. He offered fair—"

"Fair, hell! Call it fair to stampede my herd into the draws? Call it fair to fence up all the water in the world, when cows is starvin' for it? The old Jayback was here first. We run the Indians out'n this country; fit, bled, and died to make this a cow country. We've always took what we wanted. It was comin' to us. If we give in to this damn nester outfit, they'll run us ragged from here on, and I won't do it. I'll die fighting, first."

"Maybe that suits *you*, but the rest of us has got another idea. I've made my proposition to you, and you won't listen to reason. Now, I'm going to make one to the boys. It's this: that some man go around to the other side and ride as close to the camp as he can under a flag of truce; that he accept Candless's offer, if he's left it open. If he agrees, we'll water these cows an' drive 'em away from here before they all die. What do you say, boys?"

"Go to it! That's the best way out of the mess," came a chorus of voices.

"Why, damn yo' sorry souls, I'll fire every one of you!" stormed Bilby.

"You don't have to fire us," replied the spokesman, calmly. "We'll quit and leave it to you. They's some more jobs."

"Aw, hell fellows," pleaded Ross, "you know I can't do a thing with this mess by myself. What you want to do will ruin the old Jayback. The whole country will fill up with nester outfits, and they'll just plumb take it away from us. Think a minute—"

"We been thinking all night and we know what we're going to do. You can be peaceable and ride with us, or we'll hogtie you and take your gun away from you."

Ross almost strangled with rage, but his storming did no good, and he saw the cautious puncher ride away to hold parley with Tobe Candles.

"Hm, now what do you suppose is on that gent's mind?" asked Pink Taylor, as the rider approached from the west side.

He stopped fifty feet from the wagon at the edge of the barricade of dead cattle, and stated his business concisely. He wanted to know if Tobe was still willing to let them water the cattle and then drive them away.

"Does Ross Bilby agree to that?" asked Tobe.

"No, sir. We boys have taken things over. Ross wants to stay and fight. We'll agree to drive the cattle if you'll let us water 'em."

"I shore hate to see cows suffer for water," said Tobe, "but I can't take no chances with my little aces. They're all I got and they mean a lot to me. I'll make you another proposition. I don't trust Bilby none hardly at all. Bring him here, unarmed, and leave him with me, and I'll deal with you."

"Them's pretty hard terms—for Ross," said the man.

"They're the only terms I'll trade on."

The man went back, and Ross Bilby almost threw a fit when he heard the terms. "I told you what these damn nesters would do!" he yelled. "Want to hold me as hostage. Why, damn they sorry souls, I'll—"

"Now, see here, Ross," said Bill Bridgeman. "I'm windy and all that, but I got a little flock of guts myself in a showdown. This outfit don't aim to do nothin' but save them Jayback cattle. You been plumb willin' to feed us to them ravening nesters one at a time or in bunches. Now you're goin' over there and visit a while, without ary gun. Trent's been with 'em all night, and they ain't et him yet. It's up to you. Give yo' gun to one of the boys and ride around there, or we'll hawgtie you and take you. They ain't time for no more foolin'. Them cows are going to starve for water, and—I'm sorty dry myself."

Ross glared at the men, but he saw no sympathy in any of their hard, set faces. Slowly he unbuckled his belt and handed his gun to one of the riders, then mounted his horse. He was going because he had to or be carried, but he made certain mental reservations. One was that he'd fire every man in the outfit, as soon as he got out of that mess. Another was that he'd get that damned nester, if he lived long enough.

"Just climb over and come in, Mr. Bilby," invited Tobe. "We've just et, but they's plenty grub left and coffee in the pot, and you're welcome. As I understand it, you're to stay with me peaceable. So just climb down inside."

When Ross Bilby struck the ground inside that little pen, he was spouting a string of blistering oaths.

"Steady, Ross," warned Trent Giliham, in low tones, "there's a lady present."

Ross whirled on Trent, starting to vent his spleen on him. He caught sight of Cal, whose red hair was hanging below her battered old Stetson, and jerked himself up in the middle of an oath. "Excuse me, ma'am. I didn't know they was women in this outfit."

"You're excusable, I reck'n," snapped Cal. "Better eat before the coffee gets cold."

Meantime Tobe stated the terms of temporary surrender to his enemies. "Go back to yo' men. You got about thirty over there, and that's plenty. Drive a wedge through them cattle, midway the south side of the pen. Make a lane and keep it open. Then pull the staples and open the gate. Go in and drive my little aces out through the lane and push 'em on over the hill. If any one of my little aces don't get out, the deal's off. When they're all out you can cut the whole south side, and let yo' herd fill up, with the understanding you start 'em as soon as they're full."

A strange scene followed. Full of good food, and with a cigarette going, Ross Bilby saw his men take orders from the nester, and carry them out. He couldn't help a feeling of pride as he saw the Jayback riders form a wedge and split that crazy herd, saw them make a lane and by masterly horsemanship keep it open while Tobe's "little aces" scampered through it and on over the hill. He saw the starving cattle crowd through the gaps slashed in the fence until the enclosure was almost a solid mass of backs of cattle, while the riders held back yet other thousands until the first table was served.

Ross said nothing. What his thoughts were, no man could tell. All the traditions of the old Jayback had been violated that day, and all the ethics of the cow business, as he knew it, had been outraged. This nester, with two men and a woman to help him, had whipped the Jayback outfit to a standstill. The only words he could find that came anywhere near expressing his feelings were, "Well, I'll just be everlastingly damned."

It was mid-afternoon. The big herd was on its way. Every man had been abundantly fed at Tobe's camp, though he had let only one or two come at a time. He'd quit gambling! The tail end of the herd was three miles from the water hole when Ross Bilby galloped up to it. Bill Bridgeman and the cautious puncher were driving the drag.

"Here's yo' wand of office," said the bulldogger, as he handed Ross his gun, not knowing but what he'd have to shoot it out with the foreman. Ross buckled it on without a word and, driving in his spurs, galloped on toward the head of the long string of cattle.

"I wonder if that dang fool's going to try to turn 'em back," growled Bridgeman.

"He may try, but he can't do it," returned his companion. "The boys have got orders from me to point straight to big water, and they'll do it. Ross is out."

"What'll the Old Man say?"

"I don't know, and I don't care. Soon as these cattle get where they can drink, he'll have to either get a new foreman or a new gang of men. Ross is crazy about sticking to the old

way of working cattle, and it won't go any more."

As soon as the big herd left the water hole, Calla mounted her horse and hit the trail for home and her mother. She had some thoughts in her mind that had never been there before. One was that she'd had about enough of gun-slitting and bronco-busting. Another was—but no matter. Who knows what a woman is thinking, anyway?

Tobe and his men got a team and took the wagon away. Nightfall saw a desolate scene at Agua Fresca water hole. They had shot several hundred cattle to prevent the storming of their defenses. Several hundred others had been trampled to death. A swarm of buzzards and a pack of coyotes were the only living things about the place. The entire south fence of the enclosure was gone, and it was never rebuilt, nor was Tobe's right to that water ever questioned again. The name of Agua Fresca was forgotten, and to this day it is called Boneyard water hole, on account of the great heap of bones that lay there for years after that memorable day until bones became valuable and they were hauled away. There's nothing left to indicate the tragedy that occurred there that day, except the old corner posts. One of old Tobe Candle's bald-face red steers is sometimes seen rubbing its neck against one of them after grazing its full in the 10,000-acre pasture.

The big herd was bedded ten miles from the water hole that night, and next morning it was back on the home range. Pink Taylor's prediction that three days' east wind would bring rain came true. There fell that night the hardest rain that the plains country had ever known. Bill Bridgeman swore that if

the cows hadn't been dry enough to float they'd have drowned standing up.

Ross Bilby took the men all back to headquarters as soon as the creeks ran down sufficiently to allow him to do so. Most of them quit cold. A few stayed on, among them Bill Bridgeman and the cautious puncher who had saved the day. His name was King Loman, but very few knew it or knew anything else about him. He had been with the outfit only a year and hardly ever spoke, except to caution someone.

When the outfit got in to headquarters, three days after the rainy season, Trent Gilliam was there, looking as happy as if he had never been pinched or hogtied in his life. Nobody asked what ark he had been in when the deluge struck, and he forgot to tell them. All anybody knew was that he was the happiest cowpuncher in the whole Jayback outfit.

Ross Bilby had a handsome grouch for a few days. He had cooled off a bit and was wondering how he was going to explain the loss of 2,000 cattle. He was sitting in the little foreman's office one afternoon, puzzling over the problem, when King Loman came in.

"I'm leaving in the morning, Ross," he announced.

"Leavin'!" roared Ross. "Aim to quit me and leave me in the hole like the rest of them yaller kiotys?"

"No. I've saved your face all I could. My job's finished."

"What do you mean, finished?"

"Well, I didn't never tell you before, because I wasn't supposed to tell, but now—I'm the Old Man's inspector of his ranches. He sent me out here to

stay a year and report on how you handled the outfit."

Ross's mouth fell open, and it was a full minute before he could gasp. "Aw, hell! If I'd had any sense at all I'd knowed that from the way you acted. Wha—what you 'aimin' to report?"

"That depends entirely on you."

"On me?" You done seen how I handled the outfit and lose two thousand cattle in a pile."

"There are two reports I can make. One is that you are a good cowman and could handle the ranch all right, but that you're such a bull-headed stickler for the old way that you lost two thousand cattle and made an enemy of the worst gunfighter in the cattle country."

"That won't sound very good to the Old Man," said Ross, swallowing hard. "Let's hear the other one."

"The other is the same, except you lost a good many cattle on account of the drought, but you're going to work with a neighboring outfit from now on and will be able to do better when water gets scarce again. That, on the whole, I think you're the best man he can get to handle the Jayback."

"But hell, King! What'll I say if the Old Man finds out Tobe Candless's

outfit just naturally whipped the line-back hell out'n us?"

"Tell him it's a big outfit. That'll be the truth. It was too big for you to handle."

"Shore it'll be the truth!" interrupted Trent Gilliam, who had come in and was listening with a grin all over his face. "My old man told me to learn the cow business and I've learned it. Said when I learned it he'd back me with a thousand of the best cows in Texas, and—"

"What's that got to do with the Ace of Spades?"

"Right smart. I told you fellows about Calla Candless hogtyin' me. Well, I'm still hogtied. Calla and me goes partners for life. Old Man Tobe and me goes partners in the cow business, and the Ace of Spades goes on the thousand cows. Ain't that a big outfit?"

"Shore is!" Ross agreed. "Any outfit that's got old Tobe Candless and that redheaded girl in it. I did aim to kill you sometime, Trent, but we'll just shake hands and call it square. The two outfits will work side by side. Send in that second report, King. And, if anybody ever tells you again that Ross Bilby don't know when he's licked, you can tell him with my compliments that he's a dirty liar."

BOOM-TOWN ELEPHANT

TOMBSTONE, ARIZONA, one of the most colorful towns in the history of the Old West, was the only one, so far as is known, that could boast a municipally owned elephant.

A couple of years after the discovery of silver in the hills around Tombstone converted it, almost overnight, from a bare spot on the desert to a boom town of 12,000 population, a traveling carnival pitched its tents on the outskirts of the city. The carnival proprietors, noting the careless way in which money changed hands in Tombstone, decided to profit by the boom-town prices, and hiked admission fees accordingly. Miners, cowboys, gamblers, professional gunmen, and similar tough-minded citizens of Tombstone cheerfully paid the outrageous prices.

In the same cheerful manner they expressed their sentiments when the show didn't come up to their expectations. The personnel of the carnival departed rapidly from Tombstone, sped on their way by a few dozen citizens firing six-shooters after them with joyous abandon. A bear, a lion, and a tiger were turned out of their cages and a hunting party harried them through the hills with cries of "Yoicks!" and "Tally-ho!"

Several cowboys climbed aboard the elephant and rode it back to town at the head of a triumphal procession, and Jumbo was given over to the care of the Tombstone Fire Department. At intervals thereafter, revelers varied the usual custom of shooting up the town from horseback by borrowing Jumbo from the fire department and shooting out street lights and store windows from the back of the beast as it lumbered down the street with elephantine dignity.

—CARL W. SMITH

THE WELL WRITTEN reports of Captain C. Frémont ("The Pathfinder") on his various expeditions served to awaken the interest of the American public in the country west of the Mississippi in the fifth decade of the 19th century. This vivid account of Frémont's meeting with some plains Indians is taken from his Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains (1842).



An Encounter With Arapahoes

By JOHN C. FREMONT

JULY 8th.—The morning was very pleasant. The breeze was fresh from S. 50 degrees E., with few clouds; the barometer at six o'clock standing at 25.970, and the thermometer at 70 degrees. Since leaving the forks, our route had passed over a country alternately clay and sand, each presenting the same naked waste. On leaving camp this morning, we struck again a sandy region, in which the vegetation appeared somewhat more vigorous than that which we had observed for the last few days; and on the opposite side of the river were some tolerably large groves of timber.

Journeying along, we came suddenly upon a place where the ground was covered with horses' tracks, which had been made since the rain, and indicated the immediate presence of Indians in our neighborhood. The buffalo, too, which the day before had been so numerous, were nowhere in sight—another sure indication that there were people near. Riding on, we discovered the carcass of a buffalo recently killed—perhaps the day before. We scanned the horizon carefully with the glass, but no living object was to be seen. For the next mile or two the ground was dotted with buffalo carcasses, which showed that the

Indians had made a surround here, and were in considerable force.

We went on quickly and cautiously, keeping to the river bottom and carefully avoiding the hills; but we met with no interruption, and began to grow careless again. We had already lost one of our horses, and here Basil's mule showed symptoms of giving out, and finally refused to advance, being what the Canadians call *reste*. He therefore dismounted, and drove her along before him; but this was a very slow way of traveling. We had inadvertently got about half a mile in advance, but our Cheyennes, who were generally a mile or two in the rear, remained with him. There were some dark-looking objects among the hills, about two miles to the left, here low and undulating, which we had seen for a little time, and supposed to be buffalo coming in to water; but, happening to look behind, Maxwell saw the Cheyennes whipping up furiously, and another glance at the dark objects showed them at once to be Indians coming up at speed.

Had we been well mounted and disencumbered of instruments, we might have set them at defiance; but as it was, we were fairly caught. It was too late to rejoin our friends, and we endeavored to gain a clump of timber about half a mile ahead; but the instruments and tired state of our horses did not allow us to go faster than a steady canter, and they were gaining on us fast. At first they did not appear to be more than fifteen or twenty in number, but group after group darted into view at the top of the hills, until all the little eminences seemed in motion; and, in a few minutes from the time they were first discovered, two or three hundred, naked to the breech-

cloth, were sweeping across the prairie. In a few hundred yards we discovered that the timber we were endeavoring to make was on the opposite side of the river; and before we could reach the bank, down came the Indians upon us.

I am inclined to think that in a few seconds more the leading man, and perhaps some of his companions, would have rolled in the dust; for we had jerked the covers from our guns, and our fingers were on the triggers. Men in such cases generally act from instinct, and a charge from three hundred naked savages is a circumstance not well calculated to promote a cool exercise of judgment.

Just as he was about to fire, Maxwell recognized the leading Indian, and shouted to him in the Indian language, "You're a fool, God damn you—don't you know me?"

The sound of his own language seemed to shock the savage, and swerving his horse a little, he passed us like an arrow. He wheeled, as I rode out toward him, and gave me his hand, striking his breast and exclaiming, "Arapaho!"

They proved to be a village of that nation, among whom Maxwell had resided as a trader a year or two previously, and recognized him accordingly. We were soon in the midst of the band, answering as well as we could a multitude of questions; of which the very first was, of what tribe were our Indian companions who were coming in the rear? They seemed disappointed to know that they were Cheyennes, for they had fully anticipated a grand dance around a Pawnee scalp that night.

The chief showed us his village at a grove on the river six miles ahead.

and pointed out a band of buffalo on the other side of the Platte, immediately opposite us, which he said they were going to surround. They had seen the band early in the morning from their village, and had been making a large circuit, to avoid giving them the wind, when they discovered us. In a few minutes the women came galloping up, astride on their horses, and naked from their knees down and the hips up. They followed the men, to assist in cutting up and carrying off the meat.

The wind was blowing directly across the river, and the chief requested us to halt where we were for a while, in order to avoid raising the herd. We therefore unsaddled our horses, and sat down on the bank to view the scene; and our new acquaintances rode a few hundred yards lower down, and began crossing the river. Scores of wild-looking dogs followed, looking like troops of wolves, and having, in fact, but very little of the dog in their composition. Some of them remained with us, and I checked one of the men, whom I found aiming at one, which he was about to kill for a wolf.

The day had become very hot. The air was clear, with a very slight breeze; and now, at twelve o'clock, while the barometer stood at 25.920, the attached thermometer was 108 degrees. Our Cheyennes had learned that with the Arapaho village were about twenty lodges of their own, including their own families; they therefore immediately commenced making their toilet. After bathing in the river, they invested themselves in some handsome calico shirts, which I afterwards learned they had stolen from my own men, and spent some time in arranging their hair and painting themselves with some vermilion I had given them.

While they were engaged in this satisfactory manner, one of their half-wild horses, to which the crowd of prancing animals which had just passed had recalled the freedom of her existence among the wild droves on the prairie, suddenly dashed into the hills at the top of her speed. She was their pack horse, and had on her back all the worldly wealth of our poor Cheyennes, all their accouterments, and all the little articles which they had picked up among us, with some few presents I had given them. The loss which they seemed to regret most were their spears and shields, and some tobacco which they had received from me. However, they bore it all with the philosophy of an Indian, and laughingly continued their toilet. They appeared, however, to be a little mortified at the thought of returning to the village in such a sorry plight.

"Our people will laugh at us," said one of them, "returning to the village on foot, instead of driving back a drove of Pawnee horses." He demanded to know if I loved my sorrel hunter very much; to which I replied he was the object of my most intense affection. Far from being able to give, I was myself in want of horses; and any suggestion of parting with the few I had valuable was met with a peremptory refusal. In the meantime the slaughter was about to commence on the other side. So soon as they reached it, the Indians separated into two bodies. One party proceeded directly across the prairie, toward the hills, in an extended line, while the other went up the river; and instantly as they had given the wind to the herd, the chase commenced. The buffalo started for the hills, but were intercepted and driven back toward the

river, broken and running in every direction.

The clouds of dust soon covered the whole scene, preventing us from having any but an occasional view. It had a very singular appearance to us at a distance, especially when looking with the glass. We were too far to hear the report of the guns, or any sound; and at every instant, through the clouds of dust, which the sun made luminous, we could see for a moment two or three buffalo dashing along, and close behind them an Indian with his long spear, or other weapon, and instantly again they disappeared.

The apparent silence, and the dimly seen figures flitting by with such rapidity, gave it a kind of dreamy effect, and seemed more like a picture than a scene of real life. It had been a large herd when the *cerne* commenced, probably three or four hundred in number; but, though I watched them closely, I did not see one emerge from the fatal cloud where the work of destruction was going on. After remaining here about an hour, we resumed our journey in the direction of the village.

Gradually, as we rode on, Indian after Indian came dropping along, laden with meat; and by the time we had neared the lodges, the backward road was covered with the returning horsemen. It was a pleasant contrast with the desert road we had been traveling. Several had joined company with us, and one of the chiefs invited us to his lodge.

The village consisted of about 125 lodges, of which twenty were Cheyennes; the latter pitched a little apart from the Arapahoes. They were disposed in a scattering manner on both sides

of a broad, irregular street, about 150 feet wide, and running along the river. As we rode along, I remarked near some of the lodges a kind of tripod frame, formed of three slender poles of birch, scraped very clean, to which were affixed the shield and spear, with some other weapons of a chief. All were scrupulously clean, the spearhead was burnished bright, and the shield white and stainless. It reminded me of the days of feudal chivalry; and when as I rode by, I yielded to the passing impulse and touched one of the spotless shields with the muzzle of my gun, I almost expected a grim warrior to start from the lodge and resent my challenge.

The master of the lodge spread out a robe for me to sit upon, and the squaws set before us a large wooden dish of buffalo meat. He had lit his pipe in the meanwhile, and when it had been passed around, we commenced our dinner while he continued to smoke. Gradually, however, five or six other chiefs came in, and took their seats in silence.

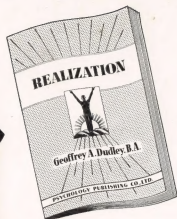
When we had finished, our host asked a number of questions relative to the object of our journey, of which I made no concealment, telling him simply that I had made a visit to see the country, preparatory to the establishment of military posts on the way to the mountains. Although this was information of the highest interest to them, and by no means calculated to please them, it excited no expression of surprise, and in no way altered the grave courtesy of their demeanor. The others listened and smoked. I remarked that in taking the pipe for the first time each had turned the stem upward, with a rapid glance, as in offering to the Great Spirit, before he put it in his mouth.

A storm had been gathering for the past hour, and some pattering drops in the lodge warned us that we had some miles to our camp. An Indian had given Maxwell a bundle of dried meat, which was very acceptable, as we had nothing; and, springing upon our horses, we rode off at dusk in the face of a cold shower and driving wind. We found our companions under some

densely foliated old trees, about three miles up the river. Under one of them lay the trunk of a large cottonwood, to leeward of which the men had kindled a fire, and we sat here and roasted our meat in tolerable shelter. Nearly opposite was the mouth of one of the most considerable affluents of the South fork, *la Fourche aux Castors* (Beaver fork), heading off in the ridge to the southeast.



"W-Wanna play tic-tac-toe, Sher'f?"



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In This Issue

THE RANGER by **Zane Grey**

Buck Duane, former outlaw and still one of the most feared and talked-of gunmen of the border country, has now sworn himself to the Ranger service in a bargain by which he has dedicated himself and his gun to making good Captain McNally's boast that Cheseldine's gang will be destroyed.

Cheseldine, Knell, Poggin — these three names symbolize the obstacles Duane must overcome if he is to succeed in his mission. Cheseldine, the leader, the brain that directs the outlaws' depredations. Knell, his trusted lieutenant, elusive, shadowy. Poggin, strange-faced, cruel-voiced, cold and dangerous, gunman supreme. How Duane goes about his mission makes a story that will enthral every lover of western yarns.

ACE OF SPADES WINS THE POT by **J. E. Grinstead**

When Tobe Candless, inveterate poker player, names his new spread the "Ace of Spades" he has a special, perhaps sentimental reason for doing so. And when the powerful layback outfit actively begins to resent the presence of the Ace of Spades on the range, Tobe stakes everything to win the biggest pot he has ever played for.

THE HAMMER THUMB by **Eugene Cunningham**

At the urgent request of the town council, Ware's Kid, on the trail of "Red Sleeves", stops over for a rough night in Las Tunas. The tough elements are aiming to take advantage of the temporarily marshal-less condition of the town, and although young Ranger Ware can't accept the job of deputy marshal offered him he admits he is available for emergency duty anywhere, anytime, on call. Action follows.

And many more thrilling stories, facts and features of the West of yesterday.

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ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE ★ No.



A simple line drawing of a horse-drawn wagon. The wagon has a large, rounded body with a high back and a flat roof. It has four spoked wheels. A single horse is harnessed to the front of the wagon, facing left. The drawing is done in a simple, sketchy style with black outlines and some grey shading on the horse's body.

MAGAZINE No. 20

MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT OF **THE RANGER** BY ZANE GREY